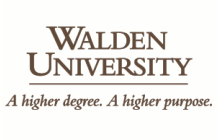

2019

Influence of Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Policy on Army Families' Food Insecurity

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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and that any and all revisions required by
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2019

Abstract

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by

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MA, University of Colorado Denver, 2010

BS, Metropolitan State College of Denver, 2009

Dissertation Submitted in Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

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December 2018

Abstract

Food insecurity (not having continuing access to nutritious food to maintain health) is common in the United States, especially in working poor households. The Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) is a well-documented safety net for individuals and families struggling with food insecurity. Little is known about the effect of SNAP policy on food insecurity in working poor military households. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate the lived experiences of food-insecure Army families and the perceived influence of SNAP policy on their food-insecurity. The theoretical framework was policy feedback theory. Data were collected from semistructured interviews with 13 Army heads of households. Data were coded and categorized to identify 3 themes: impact of Army culture, federal programs as stabilization, and limiting SNAP policy. Participants struggle with food insecurity due to unique aspects of military culture, such as transition, and the limitations of current SNAP policy. Findings may be used to inform policymakers of the influence of SNAP policy on food insecurity in the U.S. Army.

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Dedication

This doctoral study is dedicated to my daughter, Madeleine, and my son, Liam. They have been my source of motivation and strength throughout this journey. A special dedication goes to my father, John for his support, sacrifices, and hours of proofreading. A dedication to my mother, Cass who motivates and inspires me every day through her compassion and work with those in need. Finally, I would like to thank my friends and husband. Their support, wisdom, and guidance allowed me to achieve my dream of obtaining a Ph.D.

I would like to express my sincere appreciation to my dissertation committee chair, Dr. Haroon Khan, for his dedication, commitment, and guidance throughout this dissertation process. Dr. Khan was profoundly supportive of all aspects of this dissertation, and I could not have completed this without his support and expertise. My profound gratitude also goes to Dr. Amanda Deerfield for agreeing to serve on my committee as my second member. Dr. Deerfield was unbelievably supportive as I obtained my committee and defined my dissertation topic. Finally, a special thank you to Dr. Melanie Smith for serving as my University Research Reviewer.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Food insecurity impacts millions of individuals and families each year. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as not having nutritious food to maintain physical and mental health available continuously (Coleman-Jenson, Nord, & Singh, 2014). There are two forms of food insecurity: low and very low food security. Low food security indicates a household that has changed the quality of their food by buying less expensive items to stretch their food budget (USDA, 2016a). Very low food security indicates a household that has had to reduce the amount of food they consume, and in some cases have been unable to consume food (USDA, 2016a). Over the last decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of working poor families struggling with food insecurity (Pinard et al., 2016) and in need of assistance from community and safety net programs. When researchers consider the working poor, military families are often not discussed. Although very little information on military food insecurity has been collected, MAZON (2016) explained that many military bases have food pantries, and some serve up to 500 families a month. Currently 22,000 military households receive Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits; however, many military families earn too much money to qualify for federal assistance despite their need. As a result, many military families are food-insecure and are forced to find other means to ensure basic food needs are met. According to Sabatier and Weible's (2014) policy feedback theory, SNAP policy laid the groundwork for who was deserving of benefits and how that policy has influenced the development of modern policies that have deepened the struggle for many disadvantaged groups such as working poor military

families. Policy feedback theory also allows for the exploration of the adequacy of SNAP policy and its claims of supplementing food for food-insecure households by allowing the research participants to help shape future SNAP policy through feedback about the program.

Background

Many U.S. households have individuals who work full-time in a formal employment setting yet earn insufficient funds to support basic needs such as food (Thiede, Lichter, & Sanders, 2015). These are the working poor. An estimated 41% of households receiving food stamps are considered working poor households (Zedlewski, Waxman, & Gunderson, 2012). Those identified as working poor work at least 27 hours a week but still fall close to or below the federal poverty level (Zedlewski, Waxman, & Gunderson, 2012). In 2015, 8.6 million individuals fit the category of working poor (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Many working poor families, and 59% of food insecure households, use federal safety net programs to assist with issues of food insecurity (Smith et al., 2016). One population that is not considered when discussing food insecurity among the working poor is active-duty military households.

Even with full-time employment in the U.S. government, many military households struggle with food insecurity. The USDA defined food insecurity as not having continual availability of food to maintain physical and mental health (Coleman-Jenson, Nord, & Singh, 2014). Although significant research has been conducted on the drivers, effects, and needs of food-insecure working poor households, active-duty military households have not been included in this research. Military households have

unique characteristics, including transiency and separation, which can lead to the need for assistance.

Although researchers have not addressed active-duty military households and food insecurity, there has been much discussion among policymakers and leading military officials about the need for quality data on the issue. In House Report 114-102, the House Armed Services committee implored the U.S. Government Accountability Office to investigate the availability of food assistance programs for military members due to the increased use of assistance programs and the lack of concrete data on the topic (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). Wax and Stankorb (2016) found that one in seven military families with children under the age of five reported struggling with food insecurity. Data collected on military child enrollment in federal lunch programs providing free and reduced-price meals for children showed 1 in 4 children qualified for such programs (Blue Star Families, 2016b). According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016), there is strong evidence that active-duty service members are struggling to provide basic needs for themselves and their families, and studies have not been done to support these needs. The current information on use of assistance programs by the U.S. Department of Defense is limited (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). This oversight in data collection includes the need for federal food programs and federal assistance such as SNAP.

Many military families seek federal assistance to supplement their household's food. SNAP is a federal safety net program that provides grocery purchase benefits to eligible households. SNAP is the largest federal food assistance program in the United

States; it provides electronic benefit transfers that can be used to purchase and supplement food for the household (Kim & Shaefer, 2015). Eligibility for SNAP depends on income level and assets maintained, which makes eligibility difficult for many working poor families. Blue Star Families (2016b) stated that more than 22,000 military households currently receive SNAP, but a much larger number submit applications. The U.S. Census Bureau (2015) reported 23,000 active-duty military households were collecting SNAP benefits in 2013, and more than $21M in SNAP funds was used at on-base military commissaries in 2015 (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). This information shows active-duty military personnel should be considered when researching the struggles of the working poor, including food insecurity, and the safety net programs and policies designed to support them.

The drivers of military food insecurity are still widely unknown and understudied. Current research has suggested that SNAP asset policy has restricted military families in need from obtaining federal food assistance (MAZON, 2016; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). Although active-duty Army and other military members can apply to any of the federal assistance programs, their eligibility depends on factors such as location, which complicates their ability to obtain assistance. Current SNAP policy requires listing all monetary income, cars, houses, savings, and other items of value as assets. To be eligible for SNAP, a household must fall below a certain asset limit, but the current method of housing-related pay puts military families slightly above the asset limit line, thereby restricting access to needed benefits (MAZON, 2016).

Active-duty military households receive and must declare basic allowance for housing (BAH), which is an allotment of money given to active-duty members to pay or assist in paying for housing at their current duty station. Some federal safety net programs such as Women Infant and Children program (WIC) exclude BAH from the active-duty members' overall income, which enables them to qualify for the program. For programs such as SNAP, BAH is included in the application for benefits and is reported as a significant factor restraining military members from obtaining benefits to supplement food. Because the policies for all other federal food programs do not have the same asset requirements as SNAP, military use of those programs is significantly higher (Blue Star Families, 2016b). The Military Hunger Prevention Act (H.R. 1078; 2017) is currently under review by the congressional Subcommittee on Military Personnel. This act was designed to change the asset limit policy for SNAP to allow military households to exclude their BAH from their assets.

SNAP policy may be one reason Army households are struggling to obtain food security and face a financial battle. Researchers have investigated the impact that financial management has on food security (Gundersen & Garasky, 2012) and a common presumption is food insecurity is spurred from financial constraint. Many military families rely solely on the active-duty service person's paycheck because finding steady employment is often difficult for a spouse due to military uncertainty and transition. As a result, many of these working poor households live paycheck to paycheck or are unable to save money between paychecks because they make too much money to qualify for assistance programs (USDA, 2013b). Nonfood expenses can also cause financial stress

that impacts the household's ability to maintain proper funds for food (Carman & Zamarro, 2016).

Another key factor in food insecurity is geographic location and the availability of community assistance. Certain areas in the United States, such as Appalachia, have a lower availability of food and community support (Bonanno & Li, 2014). Many military families rely on local community assistance programs to survive periods of food insecurity (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). For military families, the transiency of the military means moving to remote and rural locations frequently. In addition to the financial burden of moving frequently, families face physical burdens caused by limited availability of food sources and food assistance due to the geographic location of each base.

Finally, when considering food insecurity within the military, the stigma of military culture may impact a household's decision to seek assistance. The military has a "take care of our own" way of life, which can lead to significant stigma when military households need, or receive, assistance (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). As Sabatier and Weible (2014) explained, stigma of this magnitude can shift the way policymakers and high-ranking officials within the military choose to discuss issues such as food insecurity and can shape the way policy is discussed and created. Negative policy feedback has the potential to create what the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC, 2014) has called "poverty in uniform" (p. 1). This scenario would lead to ineffective programs and policies and discussions that do not fully encompass the need that must be met to support struggling food-insecure Army and military households.

With a significant number of military households showing need for other federal support programs and food assistance, the current study was designed to understand the lived experiences of food-insecure Army households. As the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016) stated, accurate data and a deeper understanding must be obtained before the military and policymakers can fully understand what assistance is needed for food-insecure military families. The data collected through this study may provide insight for shaping services and programs, as well as changing or creating policies that may have a positive impact on active-duty military households struggling with food insecurity. I addressed active-duty military households and the driving factors behind their food insecurity, including the perceived role of SNAP asset policy.

This qualitative study included participants' perspectives to explain the driving factors behind food insecurity in the U.S. Army. The results of this study may be used to change the way military programs and resources assist members, as well as policymakers' understanding of who needs federal assistance and how SNAP policy asset limits are structured and applied. Firsthand knowledge of military food insecurity from the experiences of active-duty military may enable policymakers to address underlying causes more adequately and may help military households secure financial independence.

I used a phenomenological design to explore and understand the lived experiences of participants. The data were collected using semistructured in-person and telephone interviews with food-insecure military heads of households. Understanding the driving factors behind the participants' food insecurity is vital to understanding the challenges these military households face.

Problem Statement

The USDA defined food insecurity as not having continual availability of nutritious food to maintain physical and mental health (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2014). Since 2007, food insecurity has affected 46.2 million individuals who must look to community assistance to fill their need (Whitley, 2013). Despite being a topic of policy and research, food insecurity is still at an all-time high, even among the working poor (Pinard et al., 2016). One safety net program produced from governmental legislation and policy development is SNAP. SNAP was created to provide food to low-income families struggling with food insecurity (Schmidt, Shore-Sheppard, & Watson, 2013). The impact of food insecurity on the working poor is complex, and researchers must incorporate qualitative methods to gain a better understanding of what is needed to ensure optimum performance of the program. Qualitative research creates an in-depth understanding through firsthand experiences (Ravitch & Carl, 2016) and can provide a richer understanding of factors that contribute to food insecurity, its perceived impact, and who is affected. Although quantitative research in this area is important and allows policymakers to determine the number of people affected, it does not provide an answer to the question of why these households are experiencing food insecurity. Qualitative research can provide a deeper understanding of why households experience food insecurity, and how they experience safety net programs such as SNAP. This in-depth knowledge may provide a clearer picture of the problems with existing policies and programs and may help stakeholders generate more effective solutions.

The problem explored in this study was the impact of existing SNAP policy on food-insecure Army families. Although much research has been completed on food security as it relates to health consequences, coping mechanisms, children, family dynamics, and economic impacts, there is a gap in the literature regarding military food insecurity. I sought to close this gap by studying the impact of SNAP policy on individuals and families struggling to maintain food security in the U.S. Army. More specifically, I explored how heads of Army households perceive drivers of military food insecurity. Findings may enable policymakers at the local and federal level to support the needs of food-insecure individuals and families in the Army.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the lived experiences of food-insecure U.S. Army households and the role SNAP policy may play in their struggle. Although food insecurity is a complex issue, the focus on food insecurity within the Army community has been unstudied despite the increase in military family use of community and federal assistance (Feeding America, 2016). A phenomenological study including in-person and telephonic semistructured interviews allowed for an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of SNAP on food insecurity with Army heads of households. Interacting with heads of households through interviews allowed me to analyze the meaning, value, and significance of SNAP policy on food-insecure families.

I chose to explore food insecurity in Army heads of households in Alaska, North Carolina, and California. All three locations offer unique scenarios that lead to extreme cases of food insecurity. I am a military spouse who assists military families and works

closely with food insecurity advocacy efforts. Due to these factors, I needed to be aware of implicit bias. Providing a neutral analysis of the semistructured interviews was a priority. To ensure this, I engaged in consistent dialog with professors and experts in the area as part of my reflexivity process.

Research Questions

Food insecurity impacts millions of individuals and families across the United States, including active-duty military families. SNAP is a safety net program that was designed to reduce the financial burden of food-insecure families by providing a supplement to ensure food nutrition and availability. The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of food-insecure U.S. Army households. Specifically, this study was designed to gain an in-depth understanding of why there is food insecurity within the U.S. Army and the types of assistance needed to support those struggling with food insecurity. The study was based on three research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of food insecurity among Army heads of households?

RQ2: What are the perceived driving factors behind food insecurity in the Army?

RQ3: What are the lived experiences with SNAP policy regarding food insecurity in the U.S. Army?

Theoretical Framework

The current study was shaped by Sabatier and Weible's (2014) policy feedback theory. Heclo (1974) offered one of the earliest discussions on policy feedback, which

focused on how current policy informed political leaders' decision-making processes. According to Sabatier and Weible, policy feedback theory focuses on how current policy structures and affects subsequent and future policy. Researchers using policy feedback theory seek to understand how previous policies impact future policies, biases, and stereotypes, and hope to improve policy to include all those in need of governmental services and programs. Jacobs and Weaver (2015) explained the use of policy feedback in research by exposing self-reinforcing policies and showing that policy decisions made in the past have significant influence over the way current policy is structured. Policy feedback theory has been used extensively to explore varying aspects of policy, especially the impact of policy that is based on stereotypes and biases. Béland (2010) discussed welfare programs in relation to policy feedback and argued that social assistance program policy has always been influenced by categories of those who deserve assistance and those who are part of the deserving poor. Brunch, Ferree, and Soss (2010) linked policy feedback theory to welfare participants by discussing how certain welfare policies have the potential to deepen the struggle for disadvantaged groups and by explaining how citizens' involvement with welfare programs can create political and policy consequences. Jordan (2013) discussed how safety net programs have been affected by policy feedback theory and argued that by generating bias and defined groups of need, policy feedback theory has narrowed how policymakers perceive certain welfare issues. Policy feedback theory has been used to address how previous policy has structured the biases, conceptions, and opinions of welfare programs for both citizens and policy makers. Policy feedback theory can provide a basis for changes in policy or can

restrict perceptions of policy to keep populations in need from being included in safety net programs.

Policy feedback theory provides details of how enacted policy shapes the opinions and positions of political leaders, political parties, and interest groups regarding certain policy, as well as how previous policy lays the groundwork for writing future policy (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014). Enacted policies directly affect the way social problems are understood and are the basis for prioritization of programs and policies by government officials and citizens (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014). Moynihan and Soss (2014) stated that welfare policy is made based on political gain and is used only to appease and mitigate growing concern within voting populations. When investigating the issue of food insecurity in the U.S. Army, I examined the perceptions and lived experiences of food-insecure households with SNAP benefits and used policy feedback theory as a framework to create two avenues of study. First, I explored how previous SNAP policy laid the groundwork for identifying who was deserving of benefits and how this policy has influenced the development of modern policies that have deepened the struggle for disadvantaged groups such as working poor military families. Second, by considering the adequacy of SNAP policy and its claims to supplement food for insecure, I enabled the participants to help shape future SNAP policy through feedback and discussion of their experiences.

Nature of the Study

I used a phenomenological qualitative design to understand (a) participants' lived experiences with food insecurity and SNAP, and (b) the driving factors behind

participants' food insecurity. I recruited participants from California, North Carolina, and Alaska who have struggled or are currently struggling with food security, and who have used or attempted to use SNAP benefits. I used purposeful sampling to ensure participants fit the parameters of the study (see Patton, 2015). The sampling strategy and the research questions dictated the size of the sample (see Mason, 2010). As few as five participants and as many as 30 participants are appropriate for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2009; Mason, 2010). My sample size was 13 participants, which was large enough to reach saturation (see Creswell, 2009).

A qualitative approach was appropriate for understanding the lived experiences of food-insecure Army households, and how SNAP policy has impacted their struggle with food insecurity. Focusing the research on how food-insecure Army households make sense of their struggle with food insecurity and the role of SNAP policy was consistent with policy feedback theory. I used a phenomenological design with semistructured in-person and telephonic interviews to explore the lived experiences of Army households regarding SNAP policy and food insecurity. This qualitative design helped me understand the impact of SNAP policy and the drivers of food insecurity in Army households.

This dissertation was designed to understand the phenomenon of interest through the perspective of the participants. A phenomenological design was chosen because it is an appropriate method for illuminating unique, individual aspects of the phenomenon under study (see Creswell & Poth, 2017). Phenomenologists seek to understand the meaning, perceptions, and significance of a phenomenon on those who have experienced it (Patton, 2015). Open-ended interview questions were used to collect data that could be

synthesized into a set of overarching themes to form a holistic understanding of the phenomenon. Using phenomenology as a research design allowed me to create an understanding of why Army families experience food insecurity and how SNAP impacts their food insecurity. The findings from this study may be used to address what food-insecure U.S. Army families require to become food secure and ways to better structure policy to minimize or eliminate food insecurity.

Definitions

The following terms were used throughout this study:

Basic allowance for housing (BAH): A U.S. military housing allowance administered by the Defense Travel Management Office (Military Benefits, 2017).

Food insecurity: Not having continuous access to nutritious food to maintain physical and mental health (USDA, 2016a).

Food security: Continual access to nutritious foods for a household.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP): A federal safety net program to provide food assistance to households that fall below the poverty line (USDA, 2013b).

Woman, Infants, and Children (WIC): A federal safety net program to provide nutritious food and education for women and their children who are 5 and under (USDA, 2016b).

Working poor: Individuals working a minimum of 27 hours per week who are close to or below the poverty line (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

Assumptions

This research was conducted with several assumptions. First, I assumed that all participants would provide an honest and accurate account of their struggle with food insecurity within the U.S. Army. I also assumed that participants would be motivated solely by their interest to participate and not by ulterior motives. Finally, I assumed that the inclusion criteria would ensure that participants had firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon under study.

Scope and Delimitations

Delimitations are boundaries the researcher sets for the study and include the variables that are included and excluded from the study. Participation in the study was limited to food-insecure Army heads of household who have applied for or used SNAP. Participants were chosen from military bases in California, North Carolina, and Alaska. All participants were either active-duty Army soldiers or spouses of active-duty Army soldiers.

Limitations

Although generalization of findings is desirable, most research has limitations that impede findings from being generalized to the entire population under study. Limitations are restrictions on the research that the researcher has no ability to control (Patton, 2015). Creswell and Poth (2017) argued that documenting limitations allows readers to understand how the study was constrained.

Although the goal of this study was to obtain a better understanding of the phenomenon, the findings were not generalizable to the population under study. The

closed-door military environment described by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016) made it difficult to find participants who were willing to discuss their struggle and lived experiences of food insecurity within the U.S. Army. To increase the sampling pool, I used online forums for each Army base to identify potential participants, and I interacted with potential participants privately via e-mail. These methods allowed me to maintain confidentiality of participants who were struggling with food insecurity.

The phenomenological design has limitations. A phenomenological study is based on the participants' lived experiences and interpretations of the phenomenon. Patton (2015) explained that there are significant limitations in all qualitative research regarding the potential for a researcher to unduly influence the study, including potential discrepancies in transcriptions and misunderstanding of events and meanings between the participants and researcher. These limitations were present because the data in the study were collected through semistructured interviews. Allowing participants to verify all transcriptions was vital to ensuring that the meaning of the participants' statements was accurately understood and to minimize the impact of these limitations. Using both in-person and telephonic interviews allowed me to ask follow-up questions and explore responses in-depth, which also minimized these limitations.

Significance

The study filled a gap in understanding by focusing on food insecurity in the U.S. Army. This research was unique because it addressed an underresearched area of food insecurity (London & Heflin, 2015; MAZON, 2016) among a population that is not normally considered when addressing food insecurity (Blue Star Families, 2016b; U.S.

Government Accountability Office, 2016). This research has the potential to create social change both within the Army and military community, as well as nationally at the policy level. Understanding the phenomenon through the lived experiences of participants is a means to effect policy and program changes. The results of this study may provide a more in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of food-insecure Army households, which may be used to complement the quantitative data that the Department of Defense and U.S. Accountability Office plan to collect. The findings from this study may be used to shape policy based on an understanding of the phenomenon. Findings may also be used to create new programs or modify existing programs to address food insecurity in the Army and other military communities.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experience of SNAP policy and food insecurity in the U.S. Army. Although food insecurity and the safety net programs created to prevent it are consistently researched and discussed, there is an unjustified assumption that the struggle with food insecurity does not include working poor active-duty families. Despite working full-time in the U.S. Army, many households struggle financially.

Increasing what is known about factors that lead households to struggle with food insecurity, the ways in which they cope, and what they perceive as necessary resources may allow advocacy groups, politicians, and military personnel to make more informed decisions. Welfare and program policies are being created and discussed by military personnel and politicians. Through in-depth knowledge and understanding of the

phenomenon of food insecurity in the Army, these officials may more effectively address the fundamental needs of this population.

A qualitative phenomenological design was used to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences with food insecurity. Semistructured interviews were conducted both in person and telephonically to collect data. The data were then assessed through Sabatier and Weible's (2014) theory of policy feedback. This chapter provided an overview of the study, the background of military food insecurity, and policy feedback theory. An overview of the methodology, scope, assumptions, and limitations was also included in this chapter.

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on food insecurity and the SNAP safety net program. Food insecurity is not only a widely deliberated policy topic but is also a phenomenon that has affected the working poor. The use of safety net programs such as SNAP has the potential to allow food-insecure working poor families to achieve food security. SNAP policy has many requirements that dictate who is eligible. The current requirements limit accessibility of the program for food-insecure working poor households. Chapter 2 also includes a review of Sabatier and Weible's (2014) theory of policy feedback as it relates to past, present, and future SNAP policy.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Household food insecurity, or the inability to obtain and maintain enough food to live a healthy lifestyle, is a common policy topic in the United States. Food insecurity affects both low-income households and working poor households. There are many safety net programs in the United States that are structured to alleviate food insecurity. Although household food insecurity and the use of SNAP benefits have been significantly researched, food insecurity and the potential impact of SNAP policy on working poor military households has not been considered. This study was designed to create a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of food insecure military households, and the role that SNAP policy has played. Obtaining a firsthand account of the lived experiences of food-insecure military households may provide necessary and beneficial knowledge about the phenomenon. This literature review includes the strategy used to obtain information relevant for the current study, including Sabatier and Weible's (2014) policy feedback theory, as well as information on food insecurity, SNAP, and military food insecurity and the Military Hunger Prevention Act.

Literature Search Strategy

Prospective articles for the literature review were located through the following databases: Academic Search Premier, ProQuest Central, Sage Journals, Thoreau Multi-Database Search, Academic Search Complete, Political Science Complete, and Military and Government Collection. These databases were searched using the following keywords: *military poverty*, *food insecurity*, *food security*, *policy feedback theory*, *Skocpal*, *Sabatier and Weible*, *food stamps*, *Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program*,

military hunger, and *working poor*. I used Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR, etc.) to manage the number of search results. In addition to databases, I used multiple USDA webpages and webpages from the U.S. Department of Labor and Statistics, U.S. Census Bureau, and U.S. Government Accountability Office for information pertaining to food insecurity. Textbooks on policy theory and research methods were also included in the review of literature.

Theoretical Framework

I examined the lived experiences of food-insecure Army households, and whether SNAP policy plays a role in the struggle to obtain food security. The research was influenced by Sabatier and Weible's (2014) policy feedback theory. Policy feedback theory states that current and future biases, opinions, and policy is directly influenced by previous biases and policy (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014; Sabatier & Weible, 2014). Lowi (1968) and Heclo (1974) provided one of the first references to policy feedback. Heclo stated that enacted policy affects governance, and therefore policy directly affects politics. Skocpol (1992) continued this line of thinking and discussed how enacted policy shapes the parameters of new and current policy. Similarly, Sabatier and Weible explained that policy feedback theory encompasses the biases and opinions that shaped enacted policy and discussed how these biases and opinions carry over into how political officials change and shape policy. Policy is created based on a set of assumptions and opinions both for and against these assumptions, which are created alongside them. According to policy feedback theory, these opinions, once formed, change the ability of policymakers to reconsider the policy. The opinions also lead to the formation of

assumptions about those who benefit from the policy, and often influence how others view those beneficiaries.

Sabatier and Weible (2014) argued that the way policy is formed shapes the way problems and populations are perceived. This perception dictates what and who is worthy of political attention, and how individuals see themselves within their society (Fernandez & Jaime-Castillo, 2013; Mettler & Soss, 2004; Sabatier & Weible, 2014). Cairney and Heikkila (2014) stated that policy feedback can negatively impact less privileged citizens and those in need, as prior policy commitments and prior biases impact the willingness of policymakers to be open to shaping new policy. When considering policy feedback theory and societal issues such as food insecurity, policymakers limit the options available to shift the enacted policy to adequately address the social issue (Campbell, 2012; Flavin, 2012). Understanding the impact and need of a policy is vital to providing adequate policy that meets the needs within society.

Policy feedback theory was an appropriate theoretical base for this research because it allowed me to look at how previous SNAP policy shaped who is perceived as deserving of benefits as well as how previous SNAP policy influenced current policy, which has left certain disadvantaged groups such as the working poor without assistance. Policy feedback theory also allowed me to examine the adequacy of SNAP policy by investigating participants' lived experiences to influence future SNAP policy through their feedback and discussion of their experiences.

Policy feedback theory has been used in multidisciplinary research. Policy feedback theory has been used to show how the feedback loop within the political process

directly affects how policymakers vote (Jacobs & Weaver, 2015; Pacheco, 2013), as well as how previous and current policies within the United States are shaped to positively impact upper-income citizens (Flavin, 2012). Policy feedback theory has also been used to focus on the feedback loop of biases and stereotypes. Béland (2010) and Brunch et al. (2010) focused on the impact of policy feedback on welfare and safety net programs. Policy feedback theory has also helped researchers create a clear picture of who deserves to be assisted and who is included in the undeserving poor (Béland, 2010; Brunch et al., 2010; Jordan, 2013). Feedback has the potential to create positive change within policy, but it can also restrict how policy is viewed and shaped. Policy feedback theory research has a proven history of deepening the struggle for citizens who find themselves in need of assistance and creates assumptions and stereotypes that carry over (Brunch et al., 2010; Jordan, 2013). When policy is based on bias and assumptions, it tends to center around a specific population and creates negative feedback loops (Campbell, 2012; May & Jochim, 2013). Policy feedback theory has been used to show how policymakers view welfare and safety net program issues, and how the feedback loop can narrow the policies created (Sharp, 2013), leaving certain groups like the working poor underserved.

For policies to have positive policy feedback loops, the issues, population reached, and need must be thoroughly understood and supported (May & Jochim, 2013). Policymakers who understand the need for policy change and believe in and support the goals of the new policy will advocate and deliberate for policy change (Fernandez & Jaime-Castillo, 2013; Moynihan & Soss, 2014). The push for deliberation and policy change is conditional for policymakers and must be supported not only by policy makers

but also the political reality they find themselves in (Patashnick & Zelizer, 2013). To change the policy loop from negative to positive requires an understanding of who the population in need is and garnering support for that population.

Research indicated that the public as well as policymakers will support the welfare or safety net program and policy behind it when it is well understood and inclusive (Jordan, 2013). Positive policy feedback tends to be prevalent with more universal welfare programs because these programs reach a wider portion of those in need and are not limited in reach (Hoff-Elimari, Bardi, Matti, & Ostman, 2014; Jordan, 2013). Welfare policy is a political force that can influence political relationships, recognition, and preferences (Moynihan & Soss, 2014). Welfare and safety net program policy tends to be reflexive in nature, and previous policy has created a constraint in the flexibility of policy development (Béland, 2010; Jacobs & Weaver, 2015; Moynihan & Soss, 2014). In the United States, welfare and safety net programs tend to function on bias and assumptions about need and poverty, which limit both the reach of the policy and policymakers' willingness to understand the need.

Rationale for Selection of Policy Feedback Theory

According to policy feedback theory, previous policy impacts the way in which current and future policy is viewed and structured. Current policies regarding food security lack the substance needed to assist the growing problem that Americans face. Policy feedback theory provides researchers with deep insight into the ways hunger policy has been designed to pacify the issue of hunger but not to eradicate it since the Great Depression (Dutta, Hingson, Anaele, Sen, & Jones, 2016). Policy feedback theory

was applicable to the current study because the original SNAP policy has impacted who has been viewed as deserving of benefits, and how the safety net program has developed over the years. Fernandez and Jamie-Castillo (2013) stated that negative attitudes and assumptions toward policies and programs undermine the policy. SNAP benefits (originally food stamps) was a program created to supplement households struggling with food insecurity. The current opinions of policymakers about who is deserving and whether policies are effective impacts the willingness of policymakers to shape new policy (Jordan & Matt, 2014). Until 2017, the inclusion of military members when considering the population in need of SNAP benefits was not considered.

With growing evidence that some U.S. active-duty military service members are struggling to obtain basic needs, such as food, and are relying on safety net programs (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016), it is important to understand how SNAP policies affect the growing struggle with military food insecurity. Eligibility for SNAP depends on income level and assets maintained, which makes eligibility difficult for many working poor families. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016) stated there is evidence that SNAP asset policy restricts military service members from obtaining assistance through the program.

According to SNAP policy, all monetary income, cars, houses, savings, and other items of substantial value are to be listed as assets, including BAH, which restricts military members from obtaining needed benefits (MAZON, 2016). SNAP policy asset limits are more rigorous than other federal programs (Blue Star Families, 2016b). Policy feedback theory posits that previous policy affects current policy and exposes reinforced

policies that have impacted current policy (Jacobs & Weaver, 2015). Policy feedback shows how policies such as SNAP have deepened the struggle of disadvantaged groups (Brunch et al., 2010) by altering the assistance given to those struggling to maintain food security.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the experience with SNAP policy on food insecurity in the U.S. Army. Policy feedback theory was appropriate for the study because it guided review of the research on the creation, shaping, and potential impact of safety net policies (Jacobs & Weaver, 2015; Jordan, 2013; Mettler & Sorelle, 2014; Sabatier & Weible, 2014). Researchers use policy feedback theory to expose stigma (Jordan, 2013; Sabatier & Weible, 2014), which is a core contributing factor to how policymakers and high-ranking officials in the military choose to discuss topics such as food insecurity. The use of policy feedback theory in the current study allowed for this stigma to be identified.

Policy feedback theorists seek to understand how current policies were impacted by previous policy, and how future policy is being impacted by modern policy (Mettler & Sorelle, 2014). The purpose of the current research was to explore whether previous SNAP policy was a roadblock to assistance for disadvantaged groups, such as the military working poor, due to the structure of who was deemed worthy or in need of benefits when the program and policy was originally created. The growing rate of food insecurity, and the expansion of its reach across the United States, can be pinned on lack of Congressional response to focus policy on who is currently struggling and why (FRAC, 2016). To create better policies, policy makers require accurate data and a deeper

understanding of what assistance is needed for food insecure military families, (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). Utilizing policy feedback theory allowed me to conduct a thorough exploration of how current SNAP policy impacts food insecurity among food-insecure Army households and gave those in need of assistance an avenue for sharing policy feedback.

Food Insecurity

Policy makers consistently deliberate food insecurity, which impacts millions of individuals and families within the United States each year. Approximately one sixth of households struggled to receive enough food in 2015 (FRAC, 2016), which means tens of millions of Americans faced food insecurity within the United States in that year (Schmidt, Shore-Sheppard, & Watson, 2015). Food insecurity is defined as not having nutritious food to maintain physical and mental health available continuously (Coleman-Jenson, Rabbitt, Gregory, & Singh, 2015; Pérez-Escamilla, Gubert, Rogers, & Hromi-Fiedler, 2007; USDA, 2016). Food insecurity becomes an issue when households cannot obtain nutritionally adequate and safe food to maintain a healthy lifestyle (Whitley, 2013). Households with children are twice as likely to struggle with food insecurity (Fletcher, Andreyeva, & Busch, 2017; FRAC, 2016; Nord, 2011). More than 41.2 million Americans struggled with food insecurity in 2016, but many individuals and households are still struggling (FRAC, 2016). Food insecurity can cause lifelong health issues and can impede a person's ability to function (Schmidt et al., 2015; Schroeder & Smaldone, 2015). Lombe, Nebbitt, Sinha, and Reynolds (2016), stated the importance of increasing access to food and food-based safety net programs for the growing number of food

insecure households. Since food is essential to human survival, analysis of food security among working poor military households is necessary.

Although food insecurity is a complex and multifaceted issue, food insecurity within the military community is understudied and untracked, even though current research shows an increase in military family utilization of community and federal assistance (Feeding America, 2016). Hunger and the struggle for food security is becoming an epidemic and reaching populations of people who were never considered during creation of original hunger policy (Dutta et al., 2016). Food insecurity is associated with many negative health consequences, including poor mental and physical health, and impeded performance (Gunderson, Engelhard, & Waxman, 2014; Gunderson & Garasky, 2012; Kaiser et al., 2015), therefore the rapid growth of food insecurity is concerning. Food insecurity has long term health effects and directly affects the wellbeing of the individuals experiencing it.

Policy makers have expanded deliberation of food insecurity policy and safety net programs over the last decade. Roncarolo, Bisset, and Potvin (2016) explained the United States has yet to produce policy that provides food insecurity intervention, which is necessary to fully attack the issue of food insecurity. Gunderson and Garasky (2012) discussed the need for a deeper understanding the factors that contribute to food insecurity to adequately address the issue with appropriate policy. Kaiser et al. (2015) discussed food insecurity as a human rights issue within the United States, and the importance of the role of policy in ensuring no one goes hungry. Research on food insecurity policy has shown better detailed and accurately framed policy is necessary to

combat food insecurity and assist those in need. Similarly, Pérez-Escamilla et al. (2017) stated safety net programs need to be monitored and governed more adequately, so policy makers have more detailed information to base policy upon. Despite research showing the detriments of food insecurity, the current policies are insufficient for accurately addressing the issue.

As key decision makers such as the U.S. Accountability Office and the Department of Defense become more aware of food insecurity within the military, the need to gain a deeper understanding of the drivers and impact of food insecurity from firsthand accounts becomes more urgent. In 2015 over $24M of SNAP benefits were used within military commissaries (MAZON, 2016) and the USDA showed nearly 2,000 registered active-duty military members were enrolled in the SNAP program; however, 2014 federal census estimates show the actual number was closer to 19,455 (MAZON, 2016). London and Heflin (2015) stated although food insecurity among active-duty and recent veterans had reached significantly high levels, current policy was inadequate for addressing this issue. London and Heflin discussed the need for research that looks at the driving factors behind food insecurity, strategies military personnel use to cope with food insecurity, and SNAP policy as a barrier to assistance. In 2016, there were 475,000 active-duty Army soldiers (U.S. Army, 2017) with 1.4 spouses or children per military member (Clever & Segal, 2013; London & Heflin, 2015). With such a large population, it is vital that food insecurity be addressed adequately.

With very little previous research on active-duty military food insecurity and little record of active-duty military utilization of food resources and safety net programs,

policy makers lack significant basis for deliberating policy to adequately address food insecurity within the military. The House Armed Services Committee's recent discussions on food insecurity led to an order for the U.S. Government Accountability Office to investigate the assistance programs available to military members in need of food assistance and the reason for the lack of data (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). Approximately one seventh of military families with children under age 5 reported struggling with food insecurity in 2015 (Wax & Stankorb, 2016). In the same year, one fourth of military children qualified for school lunch and after-school meal programs (Blue Star Families, 2016b). Although these numbers are striking, there is little record of other resource and assistance program use, and the information that is available is very limited (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Nonetheless, there is clear evidence that policy makers will not be able to create adequate policy and programs to assist those in need without research on food insecurity within the military population.

Food insecurity and the working poor. Despite being widely discussed, the reach of food insecurity continues to expand from individuals struggling with homelessness to the working poor. Food insecurity and undernourishment affects 795 million people around the world (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2015), and 17.4 million (14.3%) households within the United States (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2014). Whereas much food security policy is focused on impoverished and low-income individuals, close to 7% of households that do not fall below the poverty line have been documented as struggling with food insecurity (Carman & Zamarro, 2016). Moreover, 14% of U.S. households experience food insecurity intermittently throughout

the year, while others are consistently food insecure (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2015). In 2015, 8.6 million individuals fit the category of working poor (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015), and 41% of households receiving food stamps qualified as working poor households (Zedlewski et al., 2012), which means at least one person in the household worked for at least 27 hours per week (Smith et al., 2017; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Over the last decade working poor families have found themselves struggling with food insecurity and in need of assistance through the community and safety net programs (Pinard et al., 2016). This includes active-duty military families.

Although research has shown finances play a significant role in food insecurity, generalizations about financial management do not show the whole picture. Many households with working adults struggle with food insecurity (Smith et al., 2017). Households typically have a higher rate of food insecurity when one or more adults are unable to obtain work, have poor physical health, or struggle with mental health issues (Hanson, Connor, Olson, & Mills, 2016); this finding persists even if the household is not classified below the poverty line. Community resources and government programs are two options adults can rely on to reduce daily struggles when living in a working poor household.

Working households struggle to find enough resources to provide adequate food. Dutta et al. (2016) discussed the need to document the shift of hunger to the working poor by creating an understanding of the lived experiences of those who struggle to maintain food security. Dutta et al. argued the expansion and growth of the population affected by food insecurity shows food insecurity can happen to anyone regardless of

their background. Although some working poor use community resources to receive enough food to sustain a healthy lifestyle each month (FRAC, 2016), the working poor's participation in SNAP remains low (Smith et al., 2017), the need within this population continues to grow.

Discussions of the working poor rarely include military households, even though most military bases have food pantries. MAZON (2017) explained some of these military food pantries service upward of 500 families per month, and many of these households earn slightly more than the eligibility limit for SNAP. Many of these food insecure military families are left without adequate assistance and resources and must employ a variety of coping mechanisms to meet basic food needs. This has driven the U.S. Accountabilities Office, high ranking officials, and policy makers to discuss the reasons military food insecurity occurs.

Food insecurity and finances. Food insecurity is caused by barriers such as financial strain, financial literacy, inconsistent income, limited physical availability of food, and limited affordable food choices (Bonanno & Li, 2014; Chavas, 2017). Food insecurity can also occur due to life changing events, loss of employment, or caring for extra people within the home (Dutta et al., 2016; Hanson et al., 2016). Some research has suggested financial literacy and food resource management are directly correlated to food insecurity (Chang, Kim, & Chatterjee, 2017; Coleman-Jenson et al., 2015; Gunderson & Garasky, 2012; Jarrett, Bahar, & Odoms-Young, 2014; Millimet, McDonough, & Fomby, 2015). Households that have high monetary fluctuation have a much higher rate of food instability than families that have a stable income (Hanson et al., 2016). Gunderson and

Garasky (2012) found a significant inverse relationship when researching food insecure individuals and their knowledge of financial literacy and positive financial practices. Hanson et al. (2016) found many food insecure households relied on credit, and the increasing debt only worsened their financial strain. Food insecurity is becoming more commonplace among households due to the economic climate and increases in the basic cost of living.

Food insecure households tend to have increased non-food costs. Research showed frequent unexpected costs play a significant role in food insecurity (Fletcher et al., 2017). For soldiers in the U.S. Army, costs of farewell gifts, unit gifts, uniform upgrades, military events, and other small, unexpected costs are hard to budget for and add up quickly. Another cost that impacts a household's ability to be food secure is childcare (FRAC, 2016). Hanson et al. (2016), found food insecure households made significant efforts to conserve financial resources including avoiding use of childcare. Although military installations offer varying forms of childcare, the care is not free and there is limited availability and a high turnover rate for teachers.

Food insecurity and geographic location. Food insecurity is also complex because of the location and availability of food. Previous research has shown a higher prevalence of food insecurity based on the location of the household within the United States (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2015; Murimi, Kanyi, Mupfudze, Mbogori, & Amin, 2016). Some areas within the United States have low food availability while others have low food choice availability (Bonanno & Li, 2014; Murimi et al., 2016). Rural areas tend to have higher priced food items and limited variability, causing individuals and families

within these areas to struggle with food security (Murimi et al., 2016; Whitley, 2013). Research shows the variations around the United States are significant. For example, in Slope County, North Dakota, only 3.9% of residents are food insecure, while nearly 32.8% of residents in Humphreys County, Mississippi struggle with food insecurity (Gunderson et al., 2014). In certain areas of the United States, such as the Texas Borderlands, Central Appalachia, and Lower Mississippi Delta, extreme poverty levels, lack of food supply, and lack of assistance in general all lead to an increase in food insecure households (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2015; Slack & Myers, 2013). For those who find themselves living in these areas, there are few options for individuals and families to increase their own food stability.

Regarding geographic location, housing costs and cost of living within the geographic area have a great impact on food insecurity. Fletcher et al. (2017) explained food insecurity is significantly more prevalent in areas with higher housing costs. Lombe et al. (2016), stated renters, especially young adults, were more likely to struggle with food insecurity. Although the U.S. Army provides a BAH to active-duty soldiers, the allotment is not always substantial enough to cover the full cost of housing in certain duty stations, such as Anchorage, Alaska, which ranks in the top five highest cost of living areas in the nation.

Unexpected costs of a duty station, such as outfitting a family in cold weather clothing, can also cause food insecurity. Research shows food consumption decreases, and food insecurity increases in cold areas around the nation due to residential heating costs (Fletcher et al., 2017). When housing costs increase the household's budget

decreases. Fletcher et al. (2017) presented research showing a $1000 increase in rental cost increased the likelihood of food insecurity by greater than 50%. Gundersen et al. (2014) found areas with high degrees of home ownership had low levels of food insecurity. In contrast, Hanson et al. (2016) found home ownership had negative effects on food security because unexpected expenses became a financial burden to those who were struggling. In many areas around the country, the average American is unable to afford home ownership, so renting is the only option. While rent prices are a significant budgetary constraint, geographic location of the stationed area may also be a budgetary constraint because of energy and food costs. FRAC (2016) found southeastern states and California have the highest rates of food hardship. Military stations, especially for the U.S. Army, fall into sections of the United States that are rural and have a higher rate of food insecurity.

Another detrimental factor associated with geographic location is transportation. Hanson et al. (2016) found the cost of car maintenance, car payments, public transportation, and distance to food resources presented a significant setback for many food insecure individuals. Transportation is scarce, hard to find, and expensive to hire at some Army stations. The geographic location of the Army bases also makes it difficult to find and use community resources, such as food banks.

Food insecurity and coping mechanisms. When individuals and families struggle with food insecurity, they find ways to cope with the burden and meet their basic needs. Some food insecure individuals use food pantries and federal safety net programs, such as SNAP, to supplement their need (Coleman-Jenson et al., 2015; Chang et al.,

2017; Dutta et al., 2016). Many individuals substitute nutritious foods, ration the food they can obtain, eat food that is unsafe, and/or obtain food in unsafe manners when faced with food insecurity (Hanson et al., 2016; Kempson, Palmer, Sadani, Ridlen, & Scotto, 2002; Murimi et al., 2016). Hanson et al. (2016) discussed the practice of shopping around to find the best price as a coping mechanism for food insecure households, but this mechanism is not always available to those who live on remote military bases. Murimi et al. (2016) stated many food insecure households will limit their intake of food and/or choose the cheapest options that can be stretched to last throughout the week. Coping mechanisms vary based on the severity of the food insecurity, and many households struggle to find positive coping mechanisms.

Many food insecure individuals and families utilize food pantries, food banks, safety net programs, and alter the food they purchase by swapping nutritious items for cheaper less nutritious items (Burke, Martini, Blake, Younginer, Draper, Bell & Jones, 2017; Hanson et al., 2016). While food banks, especially those within the Feeding America network, strive to offer nutritious options, many food pantries and food banks cannot obtain enough nutritious food to keep up with the increasing numbers of individuals and families seeking assistance across the nation. Roncarolo et al. (2016) explained the importance of both assisting with immediate food needs and improving the participants' situation permanently. For many facing food insecurity, food pantries and food banks cannot provide enough food to supplement and stabilize a household. In these cases, individuals and families are left with government safety net program options, such as SNAP.

Fletcher et al. (2017) argued safety net programs and community pantries are vital to food security for households struggling to maintain food security within their location. Geographic location has a significant impact on the availability and cost of food. Hanson et al. (2016) researched food insecurity circumstances and coping strategies, stating the importance of social networks, community support, and governmental programs for food insecurity. Jarrett et al. (2014) found food secure households had a significantly stronger support network within their community. Research on community-based informal assistance programs has shown such programs are highly effective for supplementation (Kicinski, 2012; Lombe et al., 2016). Hanson et al. stated many food insecure households relied heavily on support from extended family while struggling with food insecurity. For many military households, the community is restricted to the station, and some stations have limited to no resources for food support. Military households also do not have the ability to receive familial support because they are transient and are often far away from family and friends who could assist them.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) History

SNAP was originally created in 1939 by the Secretary of Agriculture, Henry Wallace, and ended in 1943. The first version of food stamps was a trial program that the Kennedy Administration created in 1961. The 88th U.S. Congress enacted the Food Stamp Act in 1964 to establish a permanent program to assist those struggling with food insecurity and poverty. In 1971, Congress enacted Public Law 91-671 to guide the administration of food stamps because the need for the program was growing exponentially. Six years later, in 1977, Congress revised the food stamps policy to

address fraudulent usage of the program and streamlined administrative duties to minimize errors within reported data. The Hunger Prevention Act of 1988 was one of the most significant changes to the food stamps program. Based on this act, the U.S. Department of Agriculture created the first electronic benefit (EBT) cards, which are still utilized today.

In 1996, Congress passed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act. This act required states to recertify applications every three months and added complexity to the application process; both changes were burdensome to the states. After the act passed, there was a significant decrease in the use of food stamps due to the increased time requirements and confusion about the application process. In 2002, Congress enacted the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act (FSRIA) with the goal of decreasing the burden of application and recertification, as well as simplifying eligibility for the program. The FSRIA also changed the way assets were counted, allowing many working families to own a vehicle without being penalized. Passage of the FSRIA resulted in a significant increase in SNAP participation because of the easy application process and year-long certification term.

The food stamps program was changed to SNAP in 2008, under the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act. The goal of this transition was to remove citizens' and policy makers' pre-existing negative associations with the food stamp program. According to the USDA (2013b), Congress used the Food, Conservation, and Energy Act to allot $10 billion to SNAP and ensure cost of living was accounted for in program

benefits. Congress also considered working poor families throughout the development of this act.

Congress created the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act in 2009 to stimulate the economy based on considerations for SNAP. For every $1 of SNAP benefits spent, $1.84 was stimulated within the economy (USDA, 2013b). The goal of this act was to push $20 billion to needy families and have the money flow back through the struggling economy. The $20 billion allotment was spent down by November 2013.

Current State of SNAP

SNAP is one of the largest and most utilized food security safety net programs produced through governmental legislation. Congress created SNAP to supplement food to low-income families struggling with food insecurity and many policy shifts occurred after it was established (Gilbert, Nanda, & Paige, 2014; Murimi et al., 2016; Schmidt, Shore-Sheppard, & Watson, 2013). SNAP exists to assist in food security and improve the health of those struggling with food insecurity (Gilbert et al., 2014; Lombe et al., 2016). In 2015, 4.6 million individuals with food insecurity received assistance through SNAP (FRAC, 2016). Currently 22,000 military households receive SNAP, and over $21M of SNAP benefits were utilized in military commissaries in 2015 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Food insecure families receive SNAP benefits in the form of an EBT card, which is used to purchase supplemental food to support the household (Dahl, Fitzgerald, Holcombe, & Schwabish, 2012; Kim & Shaefer, 2015). There was a significant increase in SNAP participation during the last decade the economic downturn within the United States.

The federal government funds SNAP, but individual states administer the program. States determine SNAP eligibility based on gross income, net income, and assets (USDA, 2017). Since states administer the SNAP program, they have some flexibility in how they administer the program and how they enroll, certify, and recertify those in need. Rosenbaum (2013) noted a significant increase in the number of households with working adults who are still receiving SNAP and stated SNAP has a significantly higher effect on employed adults than unemployed adults. With supplemented food assistance through SNAP, participating working poor households can rededicate resources to other financial areas.

Individuals and families report health issues and financial instability as the two most frequent reasons for utilizing SNAP. Families that report financial instability for more than a year are more likely to need and utilize SNAP (Purtell, Gershoff, & Aber, 2012). While financial instability is the most common cause reported within SNAP research, some research shows other hardships have a more significant impact on food insecurity in households (Depolt, Moffitt, & Ribar, 2009). Although varying hardships create scenarios of food instability, SNAP is still the largest food safety net program in the United States.

Researchers have suggested utilization of safety net programs such as SNAP create better health outcomes in food insecure homes and affirmed the importance of such governmental programs (Roncarolo et al., 2016). Research has also shown SNAP participants were more nutritionally aware and able to make more beneficial food choices than those not receiving benefits (Lombe, Nebbitt, Sinha, & Reynolds, 2016). Lombe et

al. (2016), Mabli and Ohls (2014), Mabli and Worthington (2017), and Nord (2011) found utilization of SNAP has assisted in lowering food insecurity. Shaefer and Gutierrez (2013) stated utilization of SNAP can reduce a household's food insecurity level by 12.8%, allowing them to focus on other expenses including heat and childcare. Mabli and Worthington (2017) found SNAP utilization over a 6-month period significantly lowered the need for other community resources. Researchers have also found utilization of SNAP helps to cushion and support families experiencing food insecurity, until they are able to locate or find other resources or solutions to their struggle with food insecurity (Kim & Shaefer, 2015; Mabli & Ohls, 2014). Research has also shown people in rural areas and areas with significant poverty levels, low employment rates, and poor food availability have a higher need for an active participation rate with SNAP (Slack & Myers, 2013).

Households that struggle to maintain payments for heat, water, food, and housing must make budget cuts somewhere. The most common initial budget cut for households is food, so governmental assistance like SNAP provides significant and essential supplementation that enables households to maintain a level of food security (Fletcher et al., 2017). Expanding the eligibility criteria and reach of safety net programs like SNAP is vital to combatting the growing epidemic of food insecurity (FRAC, 2016; Kaiser et al., 2015). Government representatives continue to deliberate the need for such safety net programs and there is still a portion of people in need who do not receive these benefits.

Although very little research has been conducted on active-duty food insecurity, there has been research on SNAP use among both active-duty personnel and recent

veterans. London and Heflin (2015) produced research showing 2.2% of active-duty military members utilized SNAP in 2015, and 7.1% of recent veterans, including many young veterans, utilized the program. The starting pay for an enlisted soldier is $18,800 per year for a family of two (Enterprises, n.d.), pending valuation of assets, this would be a low enough wage to qualify for food assistance through SNAP.

Even though food insecurity has become common and research has proven that food insecure households are more likely to struggle with physical, social, and mental problems, there is still a population of food insecure individuals who are not utilizing SNAP (Pinard et al., 2016). Smith et al. (2017) theorized working poor families may not be aware they could qualify for the program, may have income slightly above the eligibility level, may not have access to SNAP offices, or may be hesitant to seek assistance due to stigma. Purtell et al. (2012) stated effective changes to state and federal policies require an understanding of the barriers food insecure households face when trying to receive SNAP, as well as an understanding of who is not utilizing SNAP.

Individuals or families must be both financially poor and asset poor to meet the SNAP eligibility criteria (Nord, 2011; O'Brien, 2008). The calculation and allotment methods for SNAP benefits have not been changed in more than 20 years (Pinard et al., 2016), yet other aspects of policy, such as asset limits, have shifted. Throughout the 1990s policy makers pushed states to ensure updated income verification occurred for all SNAP participants (Wilde, 2000). States reacted by significantly shortening their certification and recertification periods, which impacted eligibility and the amount of time each household had to spend qualifying for the program. For many military

households who struggle with food insecurity, having to recertify multiple times per year conflicts with the transient lifestyle to which they are committed.

For many individuals faced with food insecurity, high rent and utility costs, unemployment rates, shifts in eligibility requirements, length of application, long verification periods, location of assistance office, type of assistance offered, state asset limits, ignorance about program qualifications, and employment stability impact utilization of SNAP (Pinard et al., 2016). For these individuals, and a significant portion of the working poor, the assets they own make them ineligible for receiving assistance through safety net programs (Dutta et al., 2016). Researchers have found the asset limit policy has detrimental effects on those in need of food assistance (O'Brien, 2008). O'Brien (2008) studied asset limits within welfare programs and found asset limits prevent many struggling individuals from saving for future financial difficulties or obtaining new assets such as a car to avoid becoming ineligible for benefits. While asset limit policy has reduced fraudulent activity, it has also become a barrier for those experiencing real food insecurity.

SNAP policy is both complex and limiting for many people who are food insecure. Congress has not set policy for SNAP eligibility to create a positive impact on food insecurity (FRAC, 2016; Lombe et al., 2016). The SNAP policy and asset limits exclude numerous individuals and families in need are proven to have a negative effect on financial stability within families (O'Brien, 2008). Lombe et al. (2016) explained eligibility for the program is complex and inconsistent despite research that has generally shown a positive correlation between SNAP receipt and lower food insecurity. Research

by MAZON (2016) showed SNAP asset policy has become a roadblock for many food insecure military households. States can dictate asset limits; therefore, each state has different limits, which causes confusion and complicates the application and renewal processes.

Anyone in the U.S. military can apply for federal assistance, however many military households remain food insecure due to the inclusion of BAH in the income and asset declaration for SNAP (MAZON, 2016). The Military Hunger Prevention Act (2017) is under deliberation within the congressional Subcommittee on Military Personnel. The proposed act includes a revision of the requirement to declare BAH as an asset to better address the needs of food insecure military households.

Food Insecurity and Stigma

Stigma around food insecurity, utilizing safety net programs, and seeking community help through food banks and pantries has a significantly negative effect on those struggling with food insecurity (Murimi et al., 2016). FRAC (2016) suggested many struggling households do not seek assistance due to fear of judgement, and many Americans do not understand the full impact and reach of food insecurity. Enacted policy and further development of welfare are consistent factors of the stigmatization of food insecurity (Dutta et al., 2016). While research shows Americans stand behind policy makers' actions to keep food insecurity under control (FRAC, 2016), the stigma of food insecurity has also led to misconceptions about those in need.

London and Heflin (2015) and Burland and Lundquist (2013) explained the U.S. military is "its own institution," with a reputation of wanting to take care of its personnel

in its own way. Researchers have shown the stigma within military culture has negative effects on the household decision to seek assistance and resources. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016) argued the "take care of our own" mindset drives this stigma and hinders the ability of military personnel or their spouses to seek help. Although the U.S. military strives to have deployment-ready units, the high rate of working poor families, lack of discussion around the issue of food insecurity, and the stigma of needing assistance often frustrates military households and prevents them from participating in SNAP.

London and Heflin (2015) stated the military provides many resources for individuals and families but resources for food insecurity are limited. Miller, Larson, Byrne, and Devoe (2015) argued receiving benefits allows military members to minimize certain drivers for food insecurity, but also noted those who face food insecurity are less likely to utilize SNAP as a safety net program. FRAC (2014) called the new age of food insecure military members "poverty in uniform" because with many active-duty military members utilizing food banks and community food resources, but only 2% utilizing SNAP, it is reasonable to consider that SNAP policy plays a key role in food insecurity for many military members.

Need for Research

Food insecurity is a complex social and political issue. Policy makers, social services agencies, and advocates have analyzed and deliberated the level of need and types of change needed to provide adequate safety net programs and food resources for those in need. Significant data has shown many hard-working individuals are still

struggling to earn enough money to obtain food security and the population of working poor households continues to grow. One population that has not been considered when addressing food insecurity among the working poor is active-duty military households.

Regarding the methodologies of previous research, there has been both qualitative and quantitative data collected. Currently the Department of Defense is collecting quantitative data on military use of SNAP. While quantitative data allows researchers to understand how widespread or severe the problem of food insecurity is, numerically, it does not help researchers understand why U.S. military families are experiencing food insecurity.

The current study was an exploration of on the lived experiences of participants who were either active-duty Army soldiers or active-duty heads of household within the U.S. Army. Even while fully employed by the U.S. Army, these households struggled with financial stability and food insecurity. Using Sabatier and Weible's (2014) policy feedback theory as a framework, I explored how previous SNAP policy impacted the understanding of who is in need and deserving of SNAP benefits, as well how previous SNAP policy impacted the modern policy that seems to be deepening food insecurity among disadvantaged groups.

Prior researchers have not addressed the reasons working poor military families struggle with food insecurity nor have they identified whether SNAP policy impacts the struggle. The present study was designed to fill this gap by addressing an under-researched area of food insecurity (see London & Heflin, 2015). With the need for food assistance growing in the United Stated military, it is vital to understand the phenomenon

from the perspective of those who have experienced it firsthand. Policy makers, researchers, service providers, and advocates can use the results of this research to supplement the quantitative data being collected by the Department of Defense and U.S. Accountability Office and create an in-depth understanding of military food insecurity.

Summary

This chapter included a comprehensive review of current research on food insecurity, SNAP, and the available research on working poor military households. The chapter also included a description of the growth in need, detriments of food insecurity, potential drivers of food insecurity, and impact of SNAP. Millions of individuals struggle with food insecurity and the number of working poor individuals in need of food assistance has increased drastically over the last decade. This includes individuals within the U.S. military.

Food insecurity has many detrimental effects, and while there are community resources and federal safety net programs in place to assist those in need of food assistance, there are significant barriers for military households in need. Even with the benefits associated with military life, many working poor military households must navigate around being food insecure. Stigma, both in general around food insecurity, as well as within the military lifestyle, has started to negatively impact whether a household applies for assistance (MAZON, 2016; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). Many military members and their families are attempting to cope with their situation, but policy makers and researchers have largely excluded them from discussions of food insecurity.

Policy groups, policy makers, advocates, and high-ranking officials need firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon of food insecurity within the military to assist those in need. Without an in-depth understanding of what these households face and the driving factors behind their food insecurity, it is not possible for policy and programs to provide adequate assistance. To create effective safety net programs, it is crucial to understand the difficulties and barriers these households face regarding food.

Chapter 3 includes a summary of the research design and data collection method. I used a phenomenological qualitative study to explore the phenomenon and gather an in-depth understanding of the barriers this population faces, the driving factors behind their food insecurity, and their perceptions of the types of support needed to overcome food insecurity within the military. Chapter 3 also includes a justification for the choice of a qualitative phenomenological research approach, the sampling strategy, and the research design.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Food insecurity in the U.S. military is a growing concern as many active-duty military personnel struggle to obtain continual and nutritious food to maintain a healthy lifestyle. I was designed to explore and create an understanding of the lived experiences of food-insecure active-duty Army households. A qualitative methodology with a phenomenological design was selected to obtain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of the food-insecure Army households. This design allowed participants to describe the factors leading to their food insecurity, the challenges they faced while food insecure within the Army, and their perceptions of the barriers to becoming food secure in the military.

This chapter provides a detailed explanation of the rationale for the chosen methodology. The research questions, sampling strategy, and data collection and analysis methods are described in detail. The chapter concludes with an explanation of the ethical considerations for the study, including participant consent.

Research Design and Rationale

Previous studies have addressed differing aspects of food insecurity, including the correlation with financial management (Chang et al., 2017; Jarrett et al., 2014), the impact of geographic location (Bonanno & Li, 2014; Millimet et al., 2015), the methods food-insecure individuals and families use to cope (Dutta et al., 2016), and the impact of food insecurity on health (Lombe et al., 2016). Previous studies also addressed aspects of SNAP, including the rate of low-income utilization (Purtell et al., 2012), the impact on families (Schmidt et al., 2013), driving factors behind the working poor's growing need

for SNAP (Rosenbaum, 2013), and employment levels of those receiving SNAP benefits (Jensen & Slack, 2003). Although these studies produced informative findings, most studies on SNAP have been quantitative. Quantitative data allow researchers to determine who is food insecure and who uses safety net programs but does not provide an in-depth understanding of why these households are food insecure. A quantitative approach would not allow for a holistic understanding of who in the U.S. Army is food insecure, or what the driving factors and experiences are for those who have been or currently are experiencing food insecurity. Therefore, a qualitative approach focusing on participants' experiences in their own words was chosen for this study to understand the phenomenon of food insecurity within the U.S. Army.

The phenomenological approach included semistructured in-person and telephonic interviews. Although there are five main approaches to qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2017), ethnography, case study, narrative, and grounded theory were not appropriate to answer the research questions. Because the study focused on the experiences of Army households struggling with food insecurity, including their perceptions of SNAP, the use of a case study or narrative study would not have provided a large enough sample because both focus on a small number of specific cases. Grounded theory is used when a new theory is produced through the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016), which did not pertain to this research because this study was based on Sabatier and Weible's (2014) policy feedback theory. Finally, ethnography is used to explore the cultural patterns of a specific group (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Although I focused on Army households, which is a culture, using ethnography would have changed the

perspective of the study. A phenomenological approach was chosen as the best qualitative approach to answer the research questions.

Phenomenology is used to create an in-depth understanding of the meaning, experiences, and perception of a phenomenon. Phenomenology, in the way it is understood today, first appeared in writings by Husserl, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (Parsons, 2012). Phenomenologists seek understanding of first-person knowledge (Patton, 2015) and strive to provide an explanation of the lived experiences of those being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The goal of a phenomenological study is to distinguish a phenomenon of interest and identify meaning and themes about the experiences of the population being studied.

For this study, the phenomenon of interest was being an active-duty member of the U.S. Army struggling with food insecurity. To conduct a phenomenological study, the researcher must be aware of his or her biases and assumptions, otherwise known as the epoch process (Englander, 2016). This awareness allows the researcher to produce an objective understanding of the phenomenon and the experiences of those who are faced with it (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Reflexivity becomes vital for the researcher to be conduct the study with a clear and naive mind-set.

Semistructured in-depth interviews with participants were the basis for this phenomenological study, which Rubin and Rubin (2012) explained as a way to "create portraits of complicated processes" (p. 3). Interviewing those affected by the phenomenon enabled production of understanding that counters old, deeply held assumptions. This was important as many policies have been based on certain

assumptions, which supported the use of policy feedback theory in this study. The semistructured interview questions were structured to elicit the most important aspects of the phenomenon from participants, and to invite discussion about aspects not previously considered. Analysis of the data involved coding, which led to the development of overarching themes that described the lived experiences of the participants related to the phenomenon.

A phenomenological study focuses on a specific phenomenon. To understand a phenomenon, a researcher gains insight and understanding from those who have experienced it. For this study, it was crucial to ensure all participants were active-duty Army heads of household who had or were currently experiencing food insecurity. Active-duty households who had not struggled with food insecurity were not be able to provide such insight and could only contemplate or relay the struggles they have seen or heard about within other households. Exploring the experiences of those living with food insecurity within the U.S. Army allowed for a deeper understanding of the contributing factors, need, and safety net policies that directly affect those struggling.

The research questions for the current study supported the phenomenological methodology. Researchers must consider the qualitative approach they are using to answer research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2017). The methodological approach of the study should yield data to answer the research question, and both aspects of the study should support and enhance each other (Patton, 2015). I sought to understand the lived experiences of food-insecure U.S. Army households struggling to establish food security. The purpose of this study was to identify the factors that lead to food insecurity within

the military, and whether SNAP policy plays a role. The research questions for the study were the following:

1. What are the lived experiences of food insecurity with Army heads of households?
2. What are the perceived driving factors behind food insecurity in the Army?
3. What are the lived experiences with SNAP policy regarding food insecurity in the U.S. Army?

Role of the Researcher

In qualitative research, the researcher plays a critical role in data collection and analysis. To ensure researchers are not exerting their own assumptions, opinions, or biases on the research, they must be forthcoming regarding their background, experiences, and link to the research (Jootun & McGhee, 2009). The researcher's role is to relay unbiased, raw, and factual information, which means not allowing his or her biases and assumptions to influence the research in any way.

Researchers must also be aware of ethical concerns because it is their responsibility to ensure the protection of the participants at all times. Qualitative researchers must be cognizant of ethical issues throughout the study from design to reporting (Sanjari, Bahramnezhad, Fomani, Shoghi, & Cheraghi, 2014). Both in-person and telephonic interviews were used to collect data from participants about their struggle with food insecurity, their coping mechanisms, and what factors contribute to their struggle. Because this was a sensitive topic and participants belonged to a unique community, confidentiality was essential. To ensure confidentiality and protect

participants, I conducted interviews off base or telephonically. Recruitment advertisements were posted online, but all responses to the ads were sent to a private e-mail. Because the military attempts to deal with problems within the military, it was vital that I maintain the confidentiality of my participants. Having participants respond online within the base forum used for recruitment would have exposed them and risked harm to their household.

Another significant role of the researcher is to remember that relationships with the participants must be solely based on the research. Any outside personal or professional relationships would create bias for the researcher and could distort the data collection and analysis. Having any formal relationship with participants could compromise the data (Rubin & Rubin, 2013) and may influence the way the participants respond to the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Because I am an officer's wife within the military and I work with food insecurity, participants who had previous interaction with me were not eligible to participate in the study. Recruitment occurred at installations where I had not worked as a family support representative in the last 3 years, to eliminate potential conflicts of interest and increase the validity of the study. Participants who responded were given an interview time and choice of in-person or telephonic interview for an initial meeting.

Qualitative interviewing requires building a relationship so that a participant can engage in the interview and feel comfortable providing open responses. Rubin and Rubin (2012) emphasized that qualitative interviewing relies on a certain amount of trust, but too much connection may skew the way in which the researcher receives information and

the way in which the participant processes and responds to questions. Personal information beyond the details about my dissertation and my background in food insecurity were not provided. Providing more detailed personal information may have jeopardized the responses I received; participants needed to feel comfortable in sharing their struggles with food insecurity with me so I could understand the phenomenon.

In a phenomenological study, the researcher is the center of the research and is the main tool for data collection. Reflexivity was vital to my understanding of my preexisting biases, assumptions, and personal beliefs about food insecurity, SNAP program policy, and military society. Jootun and McGhee (2009) argued that the researcher must be able to set aside his or her personal beliefs and assumptions to obtain raw and accurate data about the phenomenon being studied. I acknowledged that I held personal assumptions that some food-insecure military households struggle with food insecurity due to financial literacy, while some struggle with food insecurity due to limited resources. I also acknowledged that I held the assumption that asset-limit policies that require basic housing allowances to be counted as an asset in SNAP policy are an issue for food-insecure military families. These assumptions were set aside as the research continued through the interviewing and data interpretation and analysis phases to ensure the data collected from participants was raw and was not influenced by researcher bias.

Participants

In a phenomenological study, participants are chosen based on their personal experience with the identified phenomenon. Through both in-person and telephonic interviews, participants' lived experiences were collected, reviewed, and analyzed, then

coded to produce generalized themes for the phenomenon and population of study. Purposeful sampling was utilized to select participants who had experienced or were experiencing the specified phenomenon of the study. Patton (2015) states purposeful sampling allows participants to be selected based on specific criteria and parameters of the population being studied.

Participants were eligible to join the study if they were (1) older than 18 years of age, (2) married to or currently an active-duty U.S. Army soldier, and (3) currently experiencing, or had past experience of, food insecurity. I recruited participants using an advertisement posted to base web forums (Appendix B). The ad included an explanation of the need for the study and a request for participation. Participants responded via e-mail to ensure their confidentiality.

I scheduled time for in-person interviews at a specific location and/or a telephonic interview on a specific date and time with each participant. I sent informed consent forms (Appendix C) to the participants via e-mail for review before the interview and used an off-base location to ensure participant privacy for all in-person interviews. To ensure the privacy of participants participating in telephonic interviews I used GoToMeeting to conduct the interview. Prior to beginning the interview, I explained the study in detail, including the risks to the participants. The participants signed and returned the informed consent form after hearing the explanation and asking questions about the study. I also assured participants that their participation was voluntary, the interview could be stopped if they felt uncomfortable at any time, and they could choose not to answer to a question without jeopardizing the interview. I excluded participants from the study if they did not

reside in a full-time active-duty household, were under the age of 18, or felt coerced into participating.

Qualitative researchers have consistently discussed qualitative sampling in terms of reaching saturation. There is no ideal sample size in qualitative research, and the criteria by which sample size is measured varies (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Patton, 2015). When sampling, qualitative researchers should ensure the range of participants' perceptions of a phenomenon is accurately and thoroughly captured to produce a clear "picture" of the phenomenon (Mason, 2010).

The goal of any phenomenological qualitative study is to ensure the phenomenon is extensively researched and analyzed. Due to the sensitivity of my dissertation topic, I utilized purposeful sampling to ensure participants fit the parameters of my study (see Patton, 2015). A significant number of studies previously conducted on poverty and food insecurity have included a larger sample size to ensure generalizability. Purposeful sampling aligns well with phenomenological studies because each participant must have direct experience with the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2009). In a study on food insecurity and social capital, Whitley (2013) utilized a sample of 65 participants, which provided sufficient data to answer the research question appropriately and clearly. Paynter, Berner, and Anderson (2011) utilized 10 food pantries as a sample for their qualitative study on the connection between food insecurity and food pantries.

Because this dissertation utilized open-ended interviews, the information I obtained was both unique and rich in detail. I considered my dissertation sample complete once saturation occurred, and no new insights, codes, or themes emerged from

the in-depth interviews. Previous literature showed any number between five and 30 participants could serve as an appropriate sample size for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2009; Mason, 2010). My sample size was 13 participants.

I did not ask participants to share any identifying information in the interview. I warned participants of possible emotional duress that could be caused during the interview prior to beginning the interview and in the informed consent document. Since participation was voluntary, participants could choose not to answer questions and move forward with the interview or cease at any time. If a participant felt the interview caused duress at any point, I reminded them of available mental health services, which were listed on the informed consent document.

I have taken multiple steps to ensure the long-term protection of both the participants and data. I have locked all notes, recordings, copies of e-mails, and other materials used for the interviews in my home office and will destroy them after the 5-year policy limit of Walden University is reached. The notes and recordings do not include any personal information because I assigned unique identifiers to each participant, so it is not possible for the participants to be identified.

Instrumentation

Qualitative research is unique because the researcher is the main tool for data collection. For this study, open-ended semistructured in-person and telephonic interviews were used, to gather an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of food insecurity within the U.S. Army. Patton (2015) explained ensuring the phenomenon is described through those who have directly experienced it is an important aspect of phenomenology.

I used open-ended semistructured interview questions because they enabled me to explore the phenomenon through the words and expressions of those directly living it. Rubin and Rubin (2012) stated the in-person interview is a qualitative instrument that allows the researcher to explore a phenomenon through the lived experiences of those who have firsthand knowledge of it.

When deciding how to best structure the interview questions, it is appropriate for researchers to consider the best wording for the questions, the number of questions that will be adequate and appropriate, and which questions will allow the researcher to answer the overall research questions. I selected semistructured open-ended questions to allow participants to detail their lived experiences with the phenomenon, while providing me and the participants enough structure to ensure the core research questions were addressed. Patton (2015) stated an interview guide is useful for ensuring the same core questions are answered by all participants to create uniformity. The guide also enables the researcher to ask follow-up and probing questions to spur further avenues of discussion. I developed an interview guide (Appendix A) as a standard outline of the interview questions and to create flow in the interviews while producing an increased understanding of the topic of food insecurity within the military. I was able to use probing and follow-up questions in both the in-person and telephonic interviews to clarify participant responses and gather additional information about the given response.

By using semistructured interviews and the associated interview guide, I was able to utilize the time allotted for each participant efficiently, which was imperative to this qualitative research. With the interview guide, I was able to conduct a more

comprehensive interview than would be possible without a guide. Patton (2015) argued the validity of responses is greater when there is no variation in the core interview questions. While participants were able to discuss their own lived experiences and perceptions freely, my use of the same core questions provided a necessary enhancement to the validity of the study.

I thoroughly considered the semistructured interviews throughout the entire research process—from selection of the research questions for the study to finding meaning in the analysis of the collected data. Rubin and Rubin (2012) explained the benefits of utilizing in-person interviews for a research study include the ability to integrate multiple interviews to create a holistic understanding of the phenomenon under study. Rubin and Rubin also argued researchers are able to alter assumptions through the firsthand accounts they collect during in-person interviewing. Finally, Patton (2015) argued researchers are able to follow avenues he or she may not have originally considered and create a more detailed understanding of the phenomenon, by using interviews in qualitative research. Both in-person and telephonic interviews have some disadvantages. Ravitch and Carl (2016) affirmed the quality of qualitative interviews, including the quality of the data collected, depends on the competence and experience of the interviewer. Rubin and Rubin (2012) reminded researchers participants can opt not to answer a question, or to walk away from the interview all together. In-person and telephonic interviews also have the complicated requirement that participants feel safe answering questions honestly.

Purposive sampling was utilized to gain participation for the semistructured open-ended interviews. There were 20 total interview questions plus the possibility of follow-up questions. The interview questions were formed based on the research questions. The complete list of questions is provided in Appendix A. Patton (2015) explained open-ended questions allow researchers to address participants' lived experiences and perceptions. The use of semistructured open-ended interviews allowed participants to provide expansive and honest answers.

This type of interviewing also gave me the flexibility to follow-up on new aspects, or change question ordering to fit the natural flow of the interview. I did not enforce any time limits. Although the interview was designed to honor the participants' time, the interview continued until the participant felt their experience and perception had been fully documented. It is unlikely misunderstandings or rushed or shortened answers have skewed the qualitative results of this research. I digitally recorded all interviews and took written notes. I used the written notes to capture aspects of the interview that were not recorded digitally, such as facial expressions and body language.

I also used journaling, detailed memo writing, and data collection memos. I used these instruments as a form of triangulation to ensure validity and trustworthiness of the data. Ravitch and Carl (2016) stated memos can be captured during the research and utilized as data, but they are also important for checking the positionality of the research. I used journaling to write about assumptions, preconceptions, experiences, biases, and feelings as I moved through the research process. I used memo writing to capture

experiences as the research was completed from data collection to presentation. The memos showed me what I could have done differently throughout the research process.

Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

To ensure alignment with a phenomenological study, I followed certain steps to ensure collect, evaluate, and organize the data, and conducted a thorough phenomenological interview and analysis. First, I placed an advertisement in online forums for the targeted bases to recruit volunteers (Appendix B). This advertisement included details about the research study's purpose, what participants would be asked to do and share, and the compensation. Participants were not allowed to respond to the ad publicly. Potential participants contacted me via e-mail to ensure confidentiality. Upon receiving their response, I sent the potential participants a more detailed description of the research, the inclusion criteria, and a copy or the consent form. Although 20 individuals contacted me, only 13 met the inclusion criteria of the study.

I scheduled all eligible participants for a face-to-face interview at an off-base location or a specific time and date for telephonic interviews. By meeting off-base, the volunteers were allowed to participate without being seen with me. I was able to offer a more enhanced level of confidentiality through the telephonic meetings. I created a secured call-in line for all telephonic interviews using GoToMeeting. This allowed participants to keep their phone numbers confidential. Because I did not ask participants to share any identifying information during the interview, I assigned each participant a unique identifier for organization prior to the interview. This identifier was only utilized by me and the transcriber and is the name under which all information is securely stored.

Before the interview began, I discussed the basis for the interviews and the consent form with each participant. I also gave participants an opportunity to ask any questions they had during that discussion. After the participant signed the consent form, I gave the participant an extra paper copy for their files. I completed 12 of 13 interviews telephonically and one in-person, off-base. I began all interviews by stating that consent was received and the participant's unique identifier on the recording. Next, I gave the participant the opportunity to ask questions they had *on record*. I initiated the interviews with the understanding that the information provided by the participant would be used as part of the present research study. I adhered to the interview guide during each interview, asking probing or follow-up questions as necessary, and altering the questions order when appropriate to maintain the natural flow of the interview. Each interview lasted between 60 and 120 minutes, based on the depth of each participant's answers. After each interview, I compensated the participant with a $15 Amazon gift card and thanked them for their time. The data collection included consent forms, tape recordings of the interviews, subsequent interview transcriptions, e-mail notes, and journal notes.

Data Analysis Plan

The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the driving factors behind food insecurity within the U.S. Army. Designing and implementing a plan for data collection is vital to ensuring the validity of any research study. Qualitative researchers are able to maintain the integrity and trustworthiness of the research through consistency and transparency throughout the research process.

All in-person and telephonic interviews were transcribed verbatim through a transcription service then uploaded, analyzed, and coded using NVivo software. The transcriptions were labeled with the unique identifiers assigned to each participant and had no identifying information about the participants. I e-mailed the completed transcriptions to the participants for review to ensure the information I collected was accurate, and everything they wanted to convey was captured. I focused the analysis on gaining an understanding of the phenomenon and the driving factors.

Saldaña (2016) discussed the importance of reading transcriptions multiple times to gain an understanding of the overall meaning. Per Saldaña (2016), I compiled analytic memos for transparency of the coding process and read the transcriptions multiple times. I analyzed the transcriptions by using NVivo qualitative software to code for specific themes within the data. I used verbatim coding to ensure the quality and transferability of the research study results and to ensure in-depth rich data. The NVivo software streamlined the analysis and allowed me to create codes, compare the codes across interviews, and categorize the codes into major themes. Coding occurred in two documented cycles, I then created categories and extracted and compared common themes. Once the meaning was established, I was able to explore themes that arose frequently and clustered together throughout the interviews to reach a collective understanding of the phenomenon (see Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Once the data analysis was approved by my dissertation committee, I made the results of the research study available to all participants.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Researchers measure credibility and reliability differently in qualitative research than in quantitative approaches. Quantitative researchers rely on statistical data and analysis to increase validity, but qualitative researchers do not have this option. The methods of conducting fieldwork and the researcher's own credibility play a significant role in heightening the credibility of the research (Patton, 2015). One method a researcher can use to ensure credibility and validity of a qualitative study is to be transparent in expressing their own biases, assumptions, and beliefs, as well as the possible implications of the study to participants.

Researchers can also use triangulation methods to increase validity of a qualitative study. To achieve triangulation, a researcher utilizes multiple data collection methods that allow accuracy to be checked (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). After completing the in-person and telephonic interviews, I gave participants the opportunity to read the transcript of their interview and offer feedback and clarification to their statements to ensure accuracy. I also asked participants to acknowledge that the transcripts directly reflect their statements and the message they intended to convey. Creswell (2017) noted researchers use these steps, called *member checking,* to ensure the trustworthiness of the study. Member checking is one form of triangulation I used in this study.

Another form of triangulation in qualitative research is theory method. Theory method allows the researcher to examine the collected data through the lens of a theory (Patton, 2015). Viewing a phenomenon through varying perspectives increases the validity of the research. In the current research study, I viewed the data through policy

feedback theory. Through this method, I enabled participants to detail their experiences while structuring their struggle with food insecurity within a policy feedback framework. I also triangulated the data by utilizing reflective journaling and openly discussing personal biases and assumptions. By taking these steps, I increased the credibility of the data. Finally, Creswell and Poth (2017) discussed the use of rich description to aid in transferability. I used such description when sharing the results of the study to enhance the transferability of the research.

Ethical Procedures

Qualitative researchers must consider ethical risks to all participants, especially sensitive populations. Although I did not explore any illegal activity for this research study, I did explore a topic that is surrounded by negative stigma based on previous literature (see Murimi et al., 2016) and the stigma has the potential to be worse within the military community (see U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). To mitigate the risk of exposing prospective participants to stigma, I posted advertisements for the study on private pages outside of the military websites and communicated with participants and prospective participants through confidential e-mail. I also relied on off-base locations, chosen by the participant, and telephonic interviews through GoToMeeting to ensure participant privacy and comfort.

Qualitative researchers must note ethical procedures throughout the entirety of the research study. Researchers design phenomenological studies to create understanding through the lived experiences, perceptions, and eyes of other people using in-depth conversations with those people. If a participant is exposed, they would be at risk of

experiencing public shame. In the current study, exposure also included the risk of negative career impact within the military. I was able to mitigate these risks by using in-person and telephonic interviews to explore the struggles that food insecure military households were experiencing. I chose participants based on the aforementioned criteria within this chapter, and specifically selected participants who were currently struggling with food insecurity in California, North Carolina, and Alaska. I did not allow anyone who met exclusion criteria (under age, not active-duty military, no experience with food insecurity, etc.) to participate in the study.

The final step I took to mitigate all of the risks to participants was assigning a unique identifier instead of using their real names or any other identifiable information. The potential impact on social change with policy and within the military community outweighed the minimal ethical issues of conducting in-person interviews with someone struggling with food insecurity who is only identified using a unique identifier. For the remainder of this dissertation I only refer to specific participants utilizing their unique identifier.

I conducted all e-mail correspondence with participants and prospective participants through a unique e-mail address created specifically for this study and only accessible by me. I collected and stored all interview data and e-mails in a locked filing cabinet or secured computer within my home office. I keep the information stored on the computer, such as e-mail correspondence, password protected at all times. The dissertation committee and Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Walden University received, reviewed, and approved the research study as presented in the first three

chapters of this dissertation before I recruited participants or collected any data. The IRB ensured the research met ethical standards that protected participants and me from harm.

Summary

This chapter included a detailed description of the research methodology and design. The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand the lived experience of food insecure U.S. Army households and how SNAP policy impacts their struggle. The sample was comprised of 13 participants who are active-duty U.S. Army heads of households, struggling with, or who have previously struggled with food insecurity. I used a semistructured open-ended in-person and telephonic interviews to explore the phenomenon, and the NVivo software package to analyze the collected data. I used triangulation methods, including member checking and theory method, to ensure validity and reliability of the research. Chapter 4 includes a detailed presentation of the results of the study.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to gain an understanding of the lived experiences of food-insecure U.S. Army households and the role of SNAP policy in their struggle. The participants in this study participated in a confidential telephonic or in-person interview that addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the lived experiences of food insecurity among Army heads of households?

RQ2: What are the perceived driving factors behind food insecurity in the Army?

RQ3: What are the lived experiences with SNAP policy regarding food insecurity in the U.S. Army?

Results of this study may help the military community, food insecurity advocates, and policymakers create programs and reshape policy in a way that would directly benefit food-insecure military households. This chapter provides detailed results of the study organized by research question. This chapter also presents the conditions of the study including recruitment of participants, the collection of interview data, and coding and analysis of the collected data to identify the themes. Tables and figures are used to provide succinct presentations of the data, coding, and emergent themes.

Setting

Recruitment of all participants followed strict IRB guidelines. The research participants included in this study were communicative and enthusiastic about describing their lived experiences with food insecurity and SNAP policies. Participant recruitment

could not be conducted on base per U.S. Army protocol; therefore, bases were excluded as a location for recruitment.

The data collected through the research pertained to the research participants' reflections and communication on current or previous struggles with food insecurity, as well as their experience with the SNAP program. The research setting for data collection was consistent throughout the data collection process. In-person interviews were conducted at a local off-base Starbucks, and telephonic interviews were conducted using a GoToMeeting call-in line.

Participant Demographics

Participants were stationed at a base in California, North Carolina, or Alaska at the time of the study. Figure 1 shows that most participants were 18 to 25 or 26 to 33 years of age. Consistent with the inclusion criteria for the study, 11 of the 13 participants were Army spouses, and two of the 13 participants were active-duty soldiers. All 13 participants were enlisted or prior enlisted households. All participants experienced food insecurity in the past during their active duty or were currently experiencing food insecurity.

Twelve of the 13 participants were currently enrolled in or had previously been enrolled in WIC while being an active-duty household. Two of the 13 participants received SNAP benefits prior to enlisting in the U.S. Army. None of the participants were currently receiving SNAP benefits. As one participant stated:

WIC saved us. We don't qualify for a lot of things because they say that we're over income, but we're having a hard time making ends meet because they factor in the BAH as part of our income. But that's not money that we ever see.

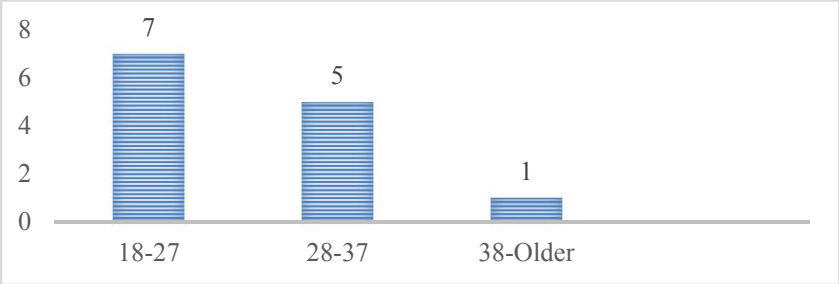

Figure 1. Number of participants per age group.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred between June 13, 2018 and July 15, 2018. All interviews were audio recorded and ranged between 45 and 90 minutes. No more than two interviews were scheduled in one day to allow time for reflective journaling. Interview memos were taken during each interview, though most of detailed responses were captured within transcription of the audio recording and not handwritten by me. Audio recordings were sent to a transcription service and downloaded as a Microsoft Word file for coding.

Participants provided detailed and at times emotional responses to the interview questions. Varying feelings of concern, frustration, and gratitude were communicated by the participants. Although participants expressed clear emotional connection to their lived experiences, there was no sense of hesitation or withdrawal during the interviews. All participants were given the number for a local crisis hotline, as approved by Walden IRB, and all participants asked to be sent the results of the study.

The plan to interview most participants in person was not realized. Of the 13 interviews, three occurred off base and 10 occurred telephonically. There were three scheduled no-shows, one of whom rescheduled. The participant who rescheduled noted a family emergency that caused a delay in the interview. This individual made clear that there was no hesitation about participating in the voluntary interview.

Recruitment concluded after the 13th participant was interviewed. Participants exhibited eagerness to discuss their lived experiences. The participants were given unique identifiers that were used throughout the interview, transcription, and analysis processes. No identifying names or base locations were included in the dissertation manuscript.

Data Analysis

Quality of this phenomenological study was a priority throughout the design and implementation process. To ensure the appropriate sample population was reached, the purpose of the study, location of the study, and inclusion criteria were carefully reviewed and selected. A strategic plan for data collection and analysis was designed, moved through the appropriate approval process, and executed as described in Chapter 3. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, sent back to participants for transcript review, copied into a Microsoft Word document, and reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy of the collected data.

Transcriptions were then uploaded into NVivo 12 for coding and analysis. Coding occurred in two documented cycles, categories were then created, and common themes were extracted and compared. Verbatim coding was used to ensure the quality and transferability of the results and to ensure in-depth data. Following recommendations

from Saldaña (2016), I compiled analytic memos for transparency of the coding process, and I read transcriptions multiple times to identify emerging themes. NVivo 12 software allowed for streamlined coding and identification of themes.

Transcriptions ranged from five to 10 pages of single-spaced data. Using NVivo software, I read each transcription multiple times and grouped data into nodes. With the research questions in mind, I created 37 nodes. Each code contained between six and 54 verbatim references. The 37 codes were then categorized into five main categories: military lifestyle, utilization of federal programs, SNAP policy, drivers of food insecurity, and coping mechanisms (see Table 1).

Thematic saturation was reached after the 10th transcript was coded and analyzed. Transcripts 11, 12, and 13 added information and further detail to existing nodes. The most common codes for the participants were coping mechanisms, impact of pay grade, transiency of military, stigma of military lifestyle, and SNAP eligibility.

Not all categories were confirmed or discussed by every participant. Some codes were not as commonly expressed as others. Example were *need to define the issue*, *military as the only form of stabilization*, *daycare*, and *financial literacy*. Although not consistently repeated throughout the data set, these codes still provided insight into the larger categories.

Table 1

NVivo Coding and Categories

1st Cycle Verbatim Codes	Second Cycle NVivo Codes	Categories
"We also got to go to, I want to say, like, 2–3 food pantries a month as well."	Community services	Coping mechanisms
"Sometimes you'd have to weigh if you should pay one bill this month or buy more food."	Unsafe food alternatives	
"We have gone into debt to make sure that there is food on the table."	Poor nutritional habits	
"There definitely were a lot of days where I didn't eat so my son would have food to eat."	Military services	
"Couponing to make sure that I could get what I needed on top of the WIC checks."	Couponing	
"We live off of ramen a lot. Um, SpaghettiOs, macaroni and cheese. Like, even now, I've been in for...it'll be 7 years in October, and it still hasn't gotten any better."	Requested programs & resources	
"We participated in Operation Homefront, when they do the food baskets and things like that for the military community."		
"I have never heard of, like, an on-post food pantry. A lot of the ones that we heard about were, like, 3 or 4 cities away, that we really couldn't get to."		

(*table continues)*

1st Cycle Verbatim Codes	Second Cycle NVivo Codes	Categories
"We get a lot more rebates and sales going off post than we do on post."	Commissary not able to cater to food insecurity	Drivers of food insecurity
"It was really expensive, especially to buy healthy food."	Communication of services needed	
"They go by a range for BAH, and it doesn't really represent the actual cost of living in that area."	Cost of living challenges	
"Rent was going for a lot higher than the BAQ or BAH."	Daycare limitations	
"We're so far away from everything. A lot of the medical help is off post."	Financial literacy	
"It is not a good life, you know, unless you are an Officer. E5 and below struggle."	Geographic impact	
"People just assume that, you know, a service member and their family get everything paid for."	Lack of on-base housing	
"They need help and they don't feel comfortable enough to go ask for help."	Lower enlisted	
"Moving down to a new station. It's expensive and it drained our bank account."	Medical need	
	Pay grade	
	Spouse employment	
	Stigma	
	Transiency of military	
	Young children in household	
"I don't think that the chain of command deals with any of that with their soldiers."	Army takes care of its own	Military lifestyle
"They really don't talk about anything like that, and I think, like, at a military level it should be pushed more."	Communication of services needed	
"Each individual squadron was sort of responsible...the officers, responsible for their enlisted."	Geographical impact	
"I guess I never thought about, like, being hungry. Especially not with military."	Lower enlisted	
"When you're in a self-contained area like this, you really have to look at what the self-contained area resources are."	Military as stabilization	
"The military pays for the truck, and movers, but our shit gets damaged, our gas and hotels cost more than they give us."	Available military services	
"You don't know where to get help when you move like every year."	Need to define issue	
	Not mission ready	
	Stigma	
	Transiency	

(*table continues)*

1st Cycle Verbatim Codes	Second Cycle NVivo Codes	Categories
"A couple of months of extra support in an area allows us to settle a little bit more." "Anything helps. A lot of families would really benefit with that extra bit of cash." "If they got rid of BAH, then that would, I think a lot of people would apply for it because that gives them more hope…like security." "We don't qualify for a lot of things because they say that we're over income, but we're having a hard time making ends meet." "We talked to people, but um, we don't qualify. My neighbor is worse off than me, and she drove really far to be told no."	Military hunger prevention act SNAP eligibility Stigma Worry for family's security	SNAP policy
"I couldn't afford formula on my own." "WIC that really was our big supporter, especially when my kiddos were little." " Food Stamps helped tremendously." "We were only eligible, at least in Maryland, for the commodity food program sponsored by, I think it was FDA at that time." "We are utilizing WIC at the moment, and um, used it for the other kids. I did look online at like, you know, applying for Food Stamps. I read um, on Facebook, that um, you don't qualify if you're military."	Meaning of WIC Reliance on federal programs Accepting help	Utilization of federal programs

Evidence of Trustworthiness

With all qualitative research, validity is key. To enhance validity with this study, I utilized member checking to ensure the participants had the opportunity to verify responses of their detailed lived experiences and perceptions. After each interview, I e-mailed the transcription of the recording to each participant, offering them the opportunity to correct, comment on, or add to anything discussed during the interview before I began coding. I also held interviews without time or other restrictions to allow participants to provide in-depth responses to questions.

I also utilized theory method to help ensure validity, by comparing the data to Sabatier and Weible's policy feedback theory. By using theory method, I was able to explore the phenomenon as it related to previously enacted policy, the assumptions of that policy, and how the policy and assumptions affected food-insecure Army households. I was also able to view the phenomenon as a way to enlighten future policy, so it may be revised to include all of those in need of governmental assistance through SNAP. By viewing military food insecurity under policy feedback theory, I was able to shift the perception of who is deserving of benefits from unemployed impoverished households to working poor active-duty military households. Finally, I used reflective journaling and open discussion of personal biases and assumptions to enhance credibility of the research study. I also enhanced the transferability of the research by collecting description-rich in-depth data through the open-ended interviews.

Results

The purpose of this study was to gain an in-depth understanding of the perceived influence of SNAP policy on food-insecure Army households, and to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of food insecurity within the U.S. Army. To directly address each research question, I analyzed transcriptions of participants' open-ended responses to each interview question for major themes. The major themes that emerged from the research study were: *impact of Army culture*, *federal programs as stabilization*, and *limiting SNAP policy*. Below, I present the detailed analysis, which is organized by research question.

Research Question 1

Food insecurity and not having enough nutritious food to maintain health is a commonly deliberated topic within the United States. Over the last decade, food insecurity has continued to expand to an increasing number of affected working poor households. To understand the perceptions and experiences of working poor Army households, I asked participants about their experience in the military, the difficulties of being an active-duty household and obtaining enough food to feed their family, and whether they felt they had enough resources to support them through their struggle. While the participants for this study each had their own unique aspect of military food insecurity, there were many commonalities between the participants. Twelve of the 13 participants noted the Army offered a form of stabilization, and assurance of paycheck. Most of the participants (80%) were lower enlisted while the remaining 20% of

respondents were higher in rank, all participants expressed a significant struggle with food insecurity for lower enlisted families:

J205: It is not a good life, you know, unless you are an officer. E5 and below struggle.

F105: The most difficult part of providing food is the fact that the paycheck just does not cover enough.

B303: The big issue comes with my husband's pay grade

F103: A lot of our struggles actually came when he was lower enlisted

J204: They get in the military and they're taken care of except for pay.

For most participants, their struggle with food insecurity as a lower enlisted household began after starting a family. Eleven of the 13 participants had young children, and many of these participants felt that their ability to provide for a child on a lower enlisted paycheck was not possible. One participant noted their struggle with food insecurity was at its most severe when they were lower enlisted with young children, and all 13 participants stated the wage they received was too low to cover all their bills. They also noted their bills were not unusual.

J202, J203, and J205 noted there was a learning curve when trying to arrange a budget as young, newly married couples, but that even with a budget in place and no luxurious expenses, they still struggled to put food on the table. Eighty percent of respondents identified the inability of a spouse to find employment with the unique demands of military lifestyle, as a hindrance to food security. While some participants reported having used federal food programs as support before enlisting in the U.S. Army,

12 of the 13 respondents were currently utilizing, or had utilized WIC (Figure 2). Seventy-five percent of those who utilized WIC reported they signed up for the program through the U.S. Army hospital where they delivered their babies.

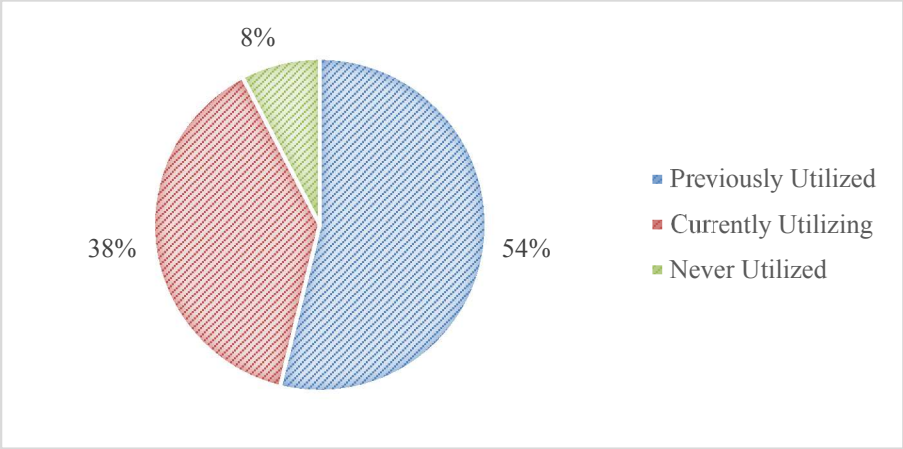

Figure 2. Participant utilization of WIC.

In addition to participants' perception of the pay grade of their families, and other lower enlisted individuals, all 13 participants noted the cost of transiency greatly impacted their families' ability to consistently acquire food. The upfront costs of hotels, food, weather related clothing, gas, and mileage amounted to more money than the Army reimbursement funds these families received. Participants also noted the impact having to spend this money upfront had on their family. Some participants stated they did not have enough money to create or maintain a savings account, some relied on family for loans and support, and others noted the transitions drained what little financial safety net they had.

> B300: With school-aged kids, you have to buy school supplies for the school year of where're you are at the moment, and then you have to buy the school supplies again for the school [you] arrive to.

F101: When we PCS, we don't get the money to move right away. Like, when I came out to California, I had to pay for myself and then I got back paid for it. So, there definitely was that time where my paychecks were a lot smaller.

F102: Reimbursement comes super late. We had so much debt from coming here

F103: Our move from Europe back to the States was probably the worst one we ever had because especially coming to California, where everything is so much more expensive than what we were currently used to. Like, we had no money for a solid month, just trying to get the move done.

J205: You pay to move, and you stay in hotels, and you hope you can rent or get on base. It is all an out of pocket expense you know? They don't like um, hand you this wad of money. You have to fork that up first. So, where um, like where does that come from. Saving? What savings?

Aside from seeing a significant impact from the transiency of the military, 12 of the 13 participants expressed difficulty with food insecurity related to geographic factors. Geographic factors included location of stores, being able to access cheaper food, having to drive significant distances for car repairs, cost of living, and distance to community support systems. There was a geographic impact on participants struggle with food insecurity as well, 30% of participants noted having to drive significant distances for medical treatment.

Many believed the perception of food insecurity within the Army was directly related to negative thoughts about financial literacy and 69% of respondents experienced stigma related to food insecurity within the U.S. Army. A few participants noted people

who were struggling were often scared to come forward to ask for help out of fear of looking weak within the Army. The participants reported receiving a negative stigma from the community as well.

J204: A thought process that because you're in the military you're not going to be struggling with food insecurity.

B302: A lot of the perception is that we misuse our money.

J202: People don't want to come out and admit it maybe, because that is embarrassing that you don't have any food in your house.

F103: Military people are really prideful. Like, it's not like a bad kind of prideful, but they don't want to be seen as weak by others in the community.

While discussing stigma, 11 of the 13 participants expressed difficulty with the way the Army structures obtaining assistance. The negative perception was based on the process of informing the chain of command. Participants believed that this process hindered them and many other food insecure individuals from seeking assistance. A few participants also noted the negative cycle of non-communication. Soldiers were not seeking assistance due to fear of judgment or career impact, and command was not discussing the issue with individual units because they were ignorant of the problems within the unity. Half of the participants explained a soldier's decision seek assistance depends on who is in command of their unit. Two of the 13 participants received FRG assistance for holiday meals during their time of need.

B303: I don't think that command talk[s] to their soldiers about it, unless something comes up where they have to intervene.

B304: Like, they don't really care, to be honest. No one really cares. They just feel it's not a concern for anybody because it's not a concern for them.

J205: Communication is not great from command about the issue. They have to um, go to command. It's like the only way to [get] help is to go to their boss. Who wants to do that?

Overall awareness of food insecurity was low; 10 of the 13 respondents noted they had never heard of food insecurity assistance on a base and two respondents noted the only assistance they received was through the on-base chapel. While the military does offer certain services, such as financial readiness courses and loan programs, the overall perception from participants was there was not enough positive impact from what was offered. Many participants believed taking a financial course and learning to budget was useful, but it did not change their inability to pay for food. A few participants noted the loan families can receive through the U.S. Army has a negative effect on food insecure families because the loan has interest that leads families into debt. Respondents also noted taking out a loan from the U.S. Army meant the soldiers command was notified, which was a significant deterrent for most participants.

Finally, when discussing their lived experiences of food-insecure Army households, five participants noted constant concern for their spouses' wellbeing and their ability to be *mission ready*.

B300: They aren't able to be fully mission ready because they have to keep focusing on, you know, the ability to pay the bills and find food for their family.

J203: As a spouse you're feeling like, okay, I'm trying to provide for my family the best I can, but then you don't have enough food. They already got to worry about the United States. But that's a lot to worry about, and then have to worry about having your family eat.

J204: I mean, you are trying to help them because, if they don't get the help and they are struggling with this, they're not going to do the best job they can for you.

Without additional resources, participants believed their struggle would continue until they reached a higher paying rank. Despite being an active-duty Army family, many participants visited community pantries, utilized federal food programs, and felt they did not have enough support or resources to assist them with their struggle with food insecurity. All 13 participants discussed the need to utilize different coping mechanisms to try to ensure they had food in their households. Figure 3 shows the various coping mechanisms participants used.

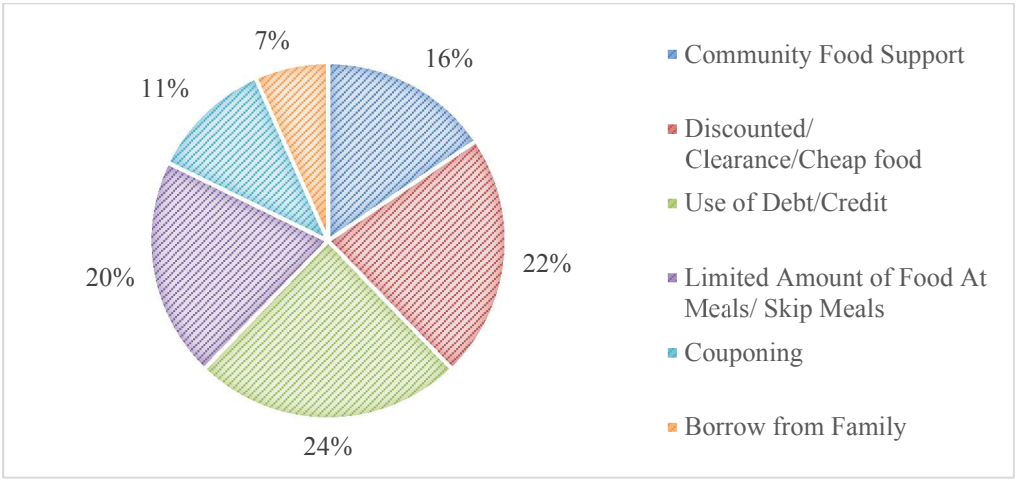

Figure 3. Participants' coping mechanisms.

Some participants noted they had to choose between paying a bill or purchasing food. Others noted they had gone into debt to ensure they had food for their family. Four of the 13 participants stated they would refrain from eating to ensure their children had food, while five other participants noted they would purchase ramen and any food cheaper than $1 to ensure the food would last through the end of the month. All the participants stated they would only purchase food that was on sale, and some would even purchase food from a dollar store.

> B300: Sometimes you'd have to weigh if you should pay one bill this month or buy more food.
>
> F103: We actually did a lot of stuff to try and save ourselves some money when we first got married. Like, we traded in both of our cars and got one, so we could only have one car payment.
>
> F101: There definitely were a lot of days where I didn't eat so my son would have food to eat.
>
> F105: We live on ramen a lot. Um, SpaghettiOs, macaroni and cheese. Like, even now, I've been in for…it'll be seven years in October, and it still hasn't gotten any better.
>
> F107: Meat is totally the biggest issue, um, honestly, so we always try to make sure it's like, on sale or on clearance. Like at the commissary, they'll have a little bin of, like, reduced-price meat.

All the participants expressed difficulty in obtaining enough food and feeling like they were consistently trying to stay ahead of their food insecurity struggle. Many

participants believed there was no communication about the issue within the military, and there was a significant stigma both inside the military and within the community about military families being taken care of. Transitions seemed to add to the households' inability to acquire food, and participants expressed concern over the time it took to stabilize after a transition. As noted, all participants utilized coping mechanisms in some form, including couponing, buying what was on sale, not eating, and utilizing community resources.

Research Question 2

Food insecurity has been widely discussed in reference to financial management, but for many working poor households across the United States there is a multitude of factors that contribute to their struggle. After discussing their experiences being food insecure while being an active-duty Army household, I asked participants about the obstacles they faced when trying to acquire food and the most difficult aspect of acquiring food. As noted in Figure 4 below, while there were 10 common obstacles discussed, pay grade, transiency of the military, geographic location, availability of military and community resources, and spouse employment were the most significant obstacles.

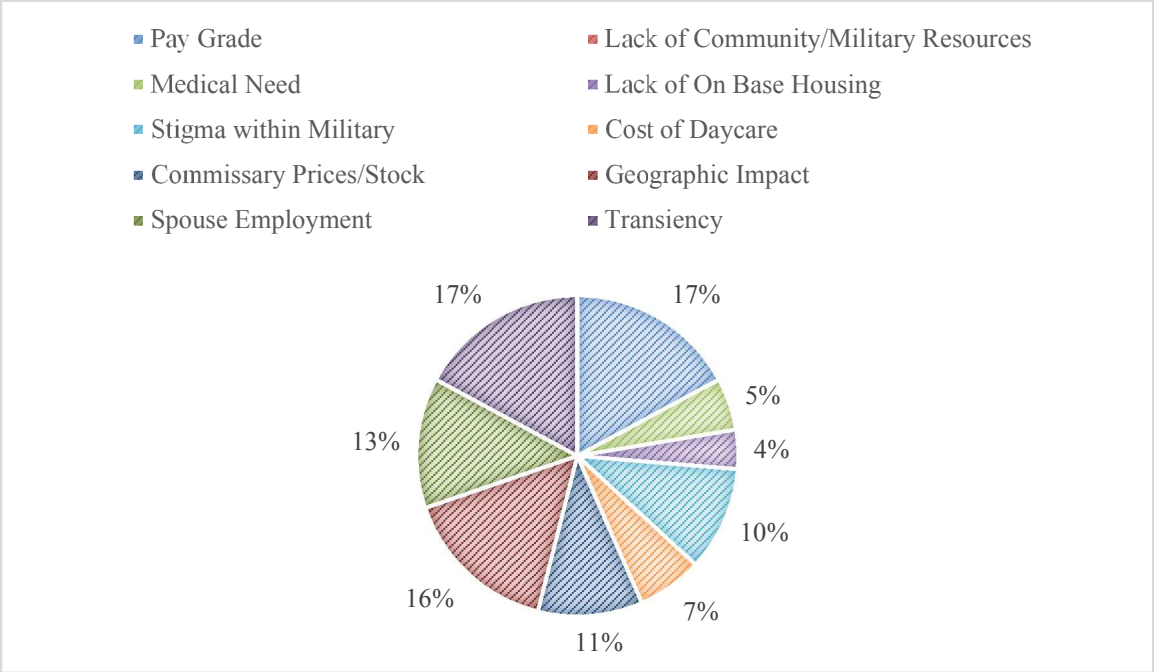

Figure 4. Participant-reported drivers of food insecurity.

Participants discussed the same factors of transiency as major obstacles that impacted their ability to acquire food. Having to pay for upfront costs to move, paying for hotel stays that are longer than the reimbursed period, restocking all food items when you move into a new home, buying school supplies, and buying weather-appropriate attire for a family were all aspects of transiency participants perceived as significantly impactful on food insecurity.

Most participants (92%) also expressed the difficulty of geographic location. Four participants had to travel far for medical issues, which put wear their car and was costly due to gas and hotel stays. Other participants noted geographic impact on their food insecurity because of the high cost of living in the area. These participants explained the impact of moving from a location where food, rent, and gas were cheaper, to a location

where it was more than double. Ten participants noted the geographic distance from stores and community support was a contributor to their struggle for food security.

> J204: Every time you go somewhere and the high cost of living, you're not compensated with COLA.* You're not compensated with gas prices in California, and you really don't have a lot, and people are sort of confined to this base because they can't even afford to get off the base. (*Cost of Living Allowance)
>
> B300: In regard to BAH and what they get paid, they do need to have someone in different areas in regions of, like, where they have service members stationed because sometimes they go by a range for BAH, and it doesn't really represent the actual cost of living in that area.

While all 13 participants were grateful for the provisions provided by the military, 12 of the 13 participants shared the lack of food-based military services and support was an obstacle for them while facing food insecurity. Many participants were unaware of any resources that could support their ability to feed their family. Most participants were not aware some military bases had food pantries. A few participants were aware of an Army loan available to families, but the overall perception of this loan program was that it would lead to the image of weakness within the soldier's unit because the commander would be notified of the loan application. These participants also noted the loan deepened the family's financial challenges, which added to their struggle with food insecurity.

> F103: I have never heard of, like, an on-post food pantry. A lot of the ones that we heard about were, like, three or four cities away, that we really couldn't get to.

J202: Beside financial planning, which we are going to tomorrow, there's really nothing

J203: There's a lot of people struggling, and there's probably something to help that we just don't know about.

J205: I see lots of Facebook posts for help. Issues you know. Help is informal, I think.

A few participants had positive experiences with family readiness groups that provide holiday gift cards or holiday food for all lower enlisted families. Participants explained working through the chain of command to find help hindered their wiliness to seek assistance. A few participants noted the decision was significantly dependent on who was in the chain of command and whether soldiers would be able to approach them for assistance.

F105: During Christmas, or no, Thanksgiving, they put, you know, the funds from probably the FRG together and for those of us who had, like, the bigger families and less pay and stuff, it was like little gift bags, where it was like, uh, sides for Thanksgiving, and then, like, they have gift cards for the commissary stuff.

Another recurring theme when discussing obstacles was spouse employment. Most participants (80%) stated that lack of employment for the spouse was one driver of their struggle with food insecurity. All participants expressed a willingness to be employed (Figure 5). Ten participants reported employment was scarce or it took too long to obtain a new state license for the professional area for a two-year station. Participants also noted the difficulty of being employed, while being the sole caretaker

for their children. In the Army, the soldier cannot be the head caretaker, so the spouse, or other caretaker must always be available to handle the children and ensure mission readiness.

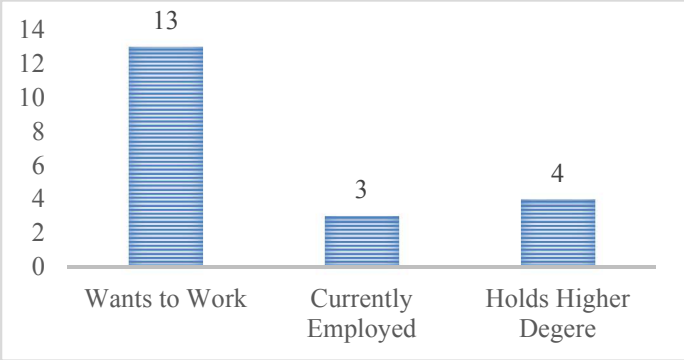

Figure 5. Spouse employment status.

B304: There's more people struggling because they just can't find a job than there is people that just don't want to work.

F105: My husband hasn't had too much luck finding jobs my entire army career, so, with only me providing money for food and everything, it's been, it's been really hard.

J205: Work is just not possible with kids and him not home. You know, um, it makes it hard to work and be the provider 100% of the time. That sucks though, because I am umm, a hard worker, and I have the ability to help my family.

More than half of participants (62%) expressed frustration with the commissary not carrying a variety of foods people struggling with food insecurity could afford. They also noted the commissary typically had empty shelves around payday, which impacted the ability to purchase cheap food. Three participants noted their household had

medically necessary special diets, and could rarely purchase diet-specific food, such as gluten-free items, at the commissary.

> B300: They don't have everything. It's like the shelves are emptied out, and so, you'd have to go to other places to try to find, for example, I have one who cannot have anything with blue coloring, or he needs more of a gluten-free type diet, and that's pretty hard to find stuff at a reasonable price.
>
> F103: Availability of being able to get what we needed with what we had to pay for it was really hard because the commissary didn't carry 90% of what we needed.
>
> J202: The commissary is really expensive, especially to buy healthy food.

Thirty-eight percent of participants stated the cost of daycare impacted their food insecurity. For most of these participants, the available employment options did not pay enough to cover the cost of daycare for their children. This was related to the previously discussed obstacle of spouse employment. For many who wanted to work, the cost of daycare would exceed their income. A few participants noted the availability of childcare was also an issue.

> B303: They take your BAH into consideration when you're getting childcare too, which makes it unaffordable.
>
> J203: His niece is out here watching our kids because we applied for CDC and their waiting list is December. I can go off-base and that's a program they'll pay for some of it, to offset the cost. Because, when I called, they were giving me like

> $200 a week, and that's one kid. I was like, there's no point in me working if I'm paying $400 a week for childcare.

While these were the most recurrent obstacles faced by food-insecure Army households, 23% noted they were food insecure due to the cost of off-base housing and their inability obtain on-base housing.

> J204: There was a year [which] was the same when I was in Hawaii, but here...it's like a month wait. But for a year wait, we put in for base housing and we had to rent something, and the rent was going for a lot higher than the BAQ and BAH.
>
> B300: We live off-post. Um, there wasn't any on-post housing available when we got here, which is the story of my life.

It is important to note 30% of participants were facing food insecurity due to a medical illness in their household. These participants were faced with the inability to receive care on or near their stationed base. Participants struggling with family medical concerns explained how difficult it is to have weekly medical commitments far from base. The commitments cost significant out of pocket money and were complicated by the participant's inability to satisfy their family's special medical diets when shopping at the commissary.

Research Question 3

For many individuals and families struggling with food insecurity, the federal safety net food program provides supplementation in their time of need. Although the government created SNAP to supplement food for those in need, many food insecure

families are not utilizing the program. For many working poor families, their income, or asset level, prevents them from obtaining assistance.

Participants were asked to discuss their experience with SNAP, including their perception of the application process. Most participants (10) researched utilizing SNAP while being an active-duty Army household. Two participants received SNAP before they enlisted, but had not qualified since, and two participants had active appointments to meet with a SNAP administrator.

Nearly all participants (12) detailed their frustration with the SNAP qualification process, noting it was all but impossible to receive SNAP once BAH was added to their earned income. Many participants noted negative conversations around qualification of SNAP. These participants reported participating in discussions with many other military families who were unable to qualify. The two participants who previously received SNAP expressed frustration with complexity of the system.

> B303: You don't qualify because you make too much. It's kind of jaded my view of the services that are supposed to be offered for everybody that needs the extra help, but it's the working class that are working that can't get any type of assistance.
>
> F101: I looked into SNAP, but I think they had a calculator, like, a base pay calculator to figure out if you would even qualify for it and I don't think we qualified for it because BAH is included in that.
>
> F105: I kind of looked into it...because I was a specialist then, um, I think I still didn't qualify.

J202: We tried to apply for food stamps, but the girl at the office said we'd get denied because he's in the military and they account for, I believe, BAH, even though we don't even see it.

J203: What they were saying, usually military doesn't qualify for food stamps, so I didn't even try.

The two participants who received SNAP prior to enlistment into the Army stated that the benefits allowed them to feel more secure when feeding their family. One participant noted they were able to buy healthy food, while the other stated SNAP saved their family in their time of struggle.

Participants were then told about the Military Hunger Prevention Act, and the proposal to change the asset limit policy for SNAP. They were then asked to share their perception of the potential impact if the policy change was enacted. As shown in Figure 6, 10 of the participants reported they would apply for SNAP immediately and noted the positive impact it would have on the military community. Two participants stated they would apply during periods of transition to ensure food security. One participant was no longer in need of food stamps but highlighted the growing need to receive food assistance among those around them.

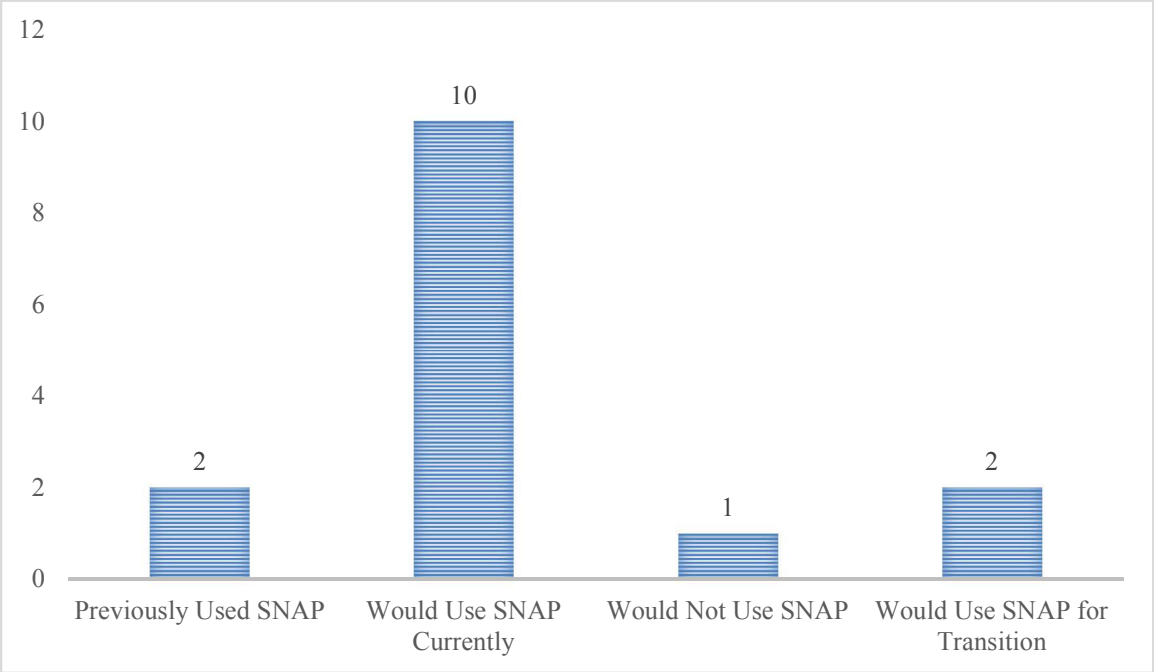

Figure 6. Potential utilization of SNAP with policy change.

B304: A couple of months of extra support in an area allows them to settle a little bit more.

F102: Anything helps. A lot of families would really benefit with that extra bit of cash. It is security at the end of the month. A bit less worry.

F105: If they got rid of that, then that would, I think a lot of people would apply for it because that gives them more hope, because, you know, they're not… they're looking at the big picture instead of, oh, I'm not going to be able to qualify because of BAH.

J203: My husband knows children need food. Positive all around for food security within the Army.

Most participants believed the smallest amount of SNAP would help ensure they had enough food to feed their families and noted even limited benefits would be extremely helpful after transitions, to help stabilize the family in a new duty station.

Based on Sabatier and Weible's (2014) policy feedback theory, participants from this study struggled to find a solution to what appears to be a stereotypical policy issue. While the income of active-duty U.S. Army households can be low enough to qualify them for SNAP, the inclusion of BAH as an asset pushes them over the asset limit. Many active-duty households believe military food insecurity is not something policy makers and commanders think about when structuring assistance for those in need. Sabatier and Weible's theory that policy is generated by bias is supported by the participants' lived experiences with food insecurity while in the Army.

While Congress enacted asset limits to protect the program from abuse, the policy is preventing U.S. Army households from obtaining assistance in a time of need. Jordan (2013) found many welfare and safety net programs have been affected by policy feedback theory because they have been structured around a biased perception of who is struggling. Fernandez and Jamie-Castillo (2013) argued negative attitudes and assumptions toward programs undermine the programs and the policies on which they are based. Participants who are struggling or have previously struggled with food insecurity while being an active-duty household found themselves in need, due to their unique military situations.

Using Sabatier and Weible's (2014) theory as a lens also shows this research can help policy makers change policy to include all those in need of governmental assistance

through SNAP. Policy makers' opinions directly affect their willingness to discuss the effectiveness of current policy and to shape new policy. Policy makers tend to view asset limits as a deterrent to abuse of the program and a way to protect taxpayer dollars. Participants from this research study offered multiple reasons military families are struggling with food insecurity and explained how the inclusion of BAH in the asset limit creates a roadblock even for temporary assistance.

The findings in this study showed there are active-duty military families struggling with food security and there are diverse drivers of military food insecurity that are directly related to the military way of life. Although low pay was a significant factor, most participants have been able to utilize the few resources they have to stabilize their families through significant transition, struggle with geographic location, and difficulty obtaining spousal employment. Stigma and lack of communication around food insecurity impacted the struggle of many participants. The research findings also showed current SNAP policy regarding asset limits prevent struggling active-duty households from obtaining needed assistance. May and Joachim (2013) found policies structured on assumptions and bias tend to be focused on a specific population, which creates a negative feedback loop. Sharp (2013) argued this negative feedback loop causes policy makers to narrow the policies and leave certain populations significantly underserved. The findings in this study show those who are struggling with food insecurity within the U.S. Army try to provide food for their household but cannot obtain food security with the low pay and minimal resources that are available to them.

Summary

The findings of this research study support the previous research and perspectives provided by MAZON (2016) and the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016). Active-duty Army households struggle with food insecurity caused by the military lifestyle and current SNAP asset policy. While being part of the U.S. Army provides certain types assistance and provisions only available within the Army, there is not enough assistance to ensure families are able to consistently provide nutritious food for their family. Data and results from this research show food insecure active-duty households can provide in-depth understanding and insight into the aspects of the military that hinder their ability to be food secure, as well as the types of programs and services they need to obtain food security. The results of this study were inconsistent with the assumption that military households in need of food assistance are financially illiterate. As demonstrated, the majority of participants noted they had no luxury expenses such as cable and made substantial effort to reduce as many household costs as possible; for example, becoming a one car family.

Research participants offered first-hand knowledge of the phenomenon of food insecurity in the U.S. Army, the impact of SNAP policy on their food insecurity, suggestions to improve programs within the Army, and insight on improving SNAP policy to ensure programs and policy address the struggles of those in need. To improve food security, participants recommended increased pay for lower enlisted families, affordable childcare, better spousal employment programs, three- to four-month military administered food assistance after transitions, on-base food pantries, and on-base

assistance offices where an administrator offers base-specific support for finding all forms of community and federal assistance. Most participants also noted open communication and non-judgmental support were required to help military families become food secure. All 13 participants believed food insecurity would continue to be a problem if the stigma of perceived weakness and fear that having an open dialogue about food insecurity would harm one's career were not removed.

The current study showed food insecurity is a significant problem within the U.S. Army. The findings also showed SNAP policy hinders working poor military families from obtaining much needed assistance. Chapter 5 includes a review of findings of the study, recommendations for further research, and an overview of the social change impact of the present research study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This qualitative study was conducted with the goal of filling the gap in the literature through exploration of the lived experiences of food-insecure Army households, the driving factors behind their food insecurity, and the role of SNAP policy in their struggle to become food secure. Semistructured interviews were conducted both in person and telephonically with 13 participants. Recordings of each interview were transcribed and uploaded into NVivo 12 for coding and analysis.

The study added to the literature on food insecurity by addressing the unique aspects of military food insecurity and the driving factors behind it. The findings of this study reflect firsthand accounts of military food insecurity. Each Army household presented a unique situation, but three major themes emerged from the research interviews: the impact of Army culture, federal programs as stabilization, and limiting SNAP policy. Impact of Army culture was characterized as being lower enlisted, being faced with the stigma of military culture when seeking assistance, facing consistent financial struggles from transition, the negative impact of geographic location including the cost of living and distance from resources, and lack of spousal employment. Federal food programs as stabilization was portrayed using federal programs such as WIC to ensure food for children in food-insecure Army households. Lastly, the limitation of SNAP policy was portrayed as not qualifying for SNAP benefits due to BAH.

To provide firsthand knowledge of the phenomenon of being food insecure in an active-duty Army household, participants had to be an active-duty Army household and currently experiencing or having previously experienced food insecurity while committed

to the U.S. Army. Each research participant was given the opportunity to detail their lived experiences of food insecurity in the Army, as well as their experiences with SNAP benefits. Recommendations for action were created based on these firsthand experiences.

Interpretation of the Findings

This qualitative phenomenological study addressed the driving factors behind Army food insecurity and the role of SNAP policy through examination of firsthand accounts from Army households. Through analysis of the qualitative data, I identified three major themes: impact of Army culture, federal food programs as stabilization, and limitations of SNAP policy. A concise examination of each theme is provided in the sections below.

Impact of Army Culture

The findings from the study offered an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of food-insecure Army households and the impact that Army culture and lifestyle has on their food insecurity. Cultural aspects of Army life, such as pay grade, transiency, geographical challenges, lack of spousal employment, lack of military services, and stigma, were identified as key factors of food insecurity. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016) stated there was strong evidence that active-duty service members are struggling to provide basic needs for themselves and their families. All 13 participants in the current study acknowledged that being enlisted and not making enough money to pay basic bills and expenses was a central difficulty for food insecure active-duty families. For many military families, financial management is a constant challenge because many rely solely on the active-duty military's paycheck. Due

to the demands and unique aspects of the military lifestyle, such as continued transition, it is not always feasible for soldiers' spouses to obtain employment. All participants were part of an active-duty Army household and were struggling or had struggled with food insecurity. These findings validate previous accounts of active-duty military households who are unable to provide basic needs (Blue Star Families, 2016b; MAZON, 2016; U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016).

Participants felt Army culture impacted their ability to become food secure not only because of pay grade but also because of the transiency of the military lifestyle. All 13 participants noted the significant financial impact that the transient lifestyle had on their household, namely upfront out-of-pocket relocation costs, spouses' inability to obtain a job, and cost-of-living adjustments that were not fully paid by the Army. Hanson et al. (2016) found a positive correlation between households with greater monetary fluctuation and increased probability of food insecurity. For Army households living with food insecurity, every additional expense requires them to take money from another budgeted area. For participants in the current study, that money typically came from the food budget.

Participants also attributed their food insecurity to geographic aspects of duty stations. Murimi et al. (2016) noted that food insecurity was more prevalent in certain geographic locations. Most participants in the current study noted that cost-of-living changes from one geographic area to another negatively impacted their ability to stabilize financially. Fletcher et al. (2017) affirmed the negative impact of high cost-of-living areas on food insecurity. Participants in the current study addressed factors such as

distance of duty stations from community resources, food sources with lower prices, and medical care that could not be found on base. The cost of commuting to these resources prevented many families from achieving food security. FRAC (2016) noted that southeastern states and areas in California have the highest rate of food insecurity. Although participants in the current study did note the receipt of a Cost of Living Allowance, they reported limitations of this allowance and the need for the military to reassess the amount to account for necessary travel to receive services and obtain resources.

Findings in the current study also showed that military culture greatly impacts a spouse's ability to gain employment. Findings mirrored those from Meadows, Griffin, Pollak, and Karney (2016) who found that military spouses have less opportunity for employment, earn less money than civilians, and need employment assistance due to the unique transient lifestyle of the military. Eighty percent of participants in the current study discussed the negative impact military lifestyle had on their ability to seek or obtain employment. Although participants were eager and willing to be employed, the limited availability of affordable childcare and jobs became a roadblock to obtaining a second income.

Participants also attributed their struggle with food insecurity to a lack of military resources and stigma within the U.S. Army. Burland and Lundquist (2013) explained the importance of the "take care of its own" motto in the military. Several participants in the current study stated they had not heard of any programs available to assist them in the Army. Eleven of 13 participants related their struggle to the Army's chain of command

structure for obtaining assistance. Participants felt that they had to weigh the impact of seeking approval and assistance from the chain of command against the potential for moderate food security. Many participants were not seeking assistance because of fear of judgment or negative career impact.

Findings from this study also suggested a need to increase the base wage that enlisted families are paid to ensure active-duty Army households earn enough money to provide basic needs for themselves and their families. As shown in Table 2, lower enlisted soldiers' monthly earnings are extremely low, with newly enlisted soldiers (E1) earning less than $20,000 per year (Federalpay.org, 2017).

Table 2

2017 Army Enlisted Monthly Pay Chart for Up to 6 Years of Service

	Years of service				
Pay grade	Less than 2	Over 2	Over 3	Over 4	Over 6
E-7	$2875	$3138	$3258	$3418	$3542
E-6	$2487	$2736	$2857	$2975	$3097
E-5	$2278	$2431	$2549	$2669	$2857
E-4	$2089	$2196	$2315	$2432	$2536
E-3	$1886	$2004	$2126	$2126	$2126
E-2	$1793	$1793	$1793	$1793	$1793
E-1	$1600	$1600	$1600	$1600	$1600
E-1 (< 4 months)	$1480	-	-	-	-

The federal poverty guideline for a two-person household in all states except Alaska is $16,460 (Poverty Guidelines, 2018). Most participants in the current study had at least two children, which moved the federal poverty guideline to $25,100. Although military families are paid above the federal poverty guideline, there are unique costs the families face while being an active-duty military family. Increasing base pay for enlisted

families would ensure they could provide basic necessities such as food and allow them to save for the frequent transitional costs they incur.

Finding from this study indicated it is necessary to create a new system of support that is not reliant on the chain of command within the Army. Eighty-five percent of participants noted the difficulty of obtaining assistance within the Army for their struggle with food insecurity. Although lack of resources was discussed, most participants explained concerns about the possible negative implications of informing the chain of command. Murimi et al. (2016) affirmed the detrimental impact of stigma around seeking assistance for food insecurity. The U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016) also affirmed that stigma in the military has hindered military households from seeking assistance. Creating a program that focuses on supporting food-insecure Army households and does not require approval from or notification within the chain of command may provide community assistance that ensures Army households do not live without food. A confidential program that provides food supplementation and connects needy households to community support resources may benefit those currently struggling with food insecurity.

Federal Programs as Stabilization

Findings from this study indicated the use of federal food programs as a form of stabilization for food-insecure military families and verified previous accounts of federal food program use as a form of stabilization within food-insecure military households. One in seven military families struggles with food insecurity (Wax & Stankorb, 2016), and 1 in 4 military children use school-based federal food programs (Blue Star Families,

2016b). Ninety-two percent of participants in the current study were enrolled in or had previously been enrolled in the WIC program while being an active-duty family.

Participants detailed the need for federal food support to ensure their children were able to eat. Although participants noted many other coping mechanisms such as skipping meals and limiting portions, multiple participants described WIC as the only consistent resource for feeding their children. WIC offers unique nutritional benefits for children and families in need; it has been proven effective and was also demonstrated as one of the most alluring programs for those struggling with food insecurity (Besharov & Germanis, 2000). Participants shared that WIC is used at a high rate within the U.S. Army, which confirmed findings from the recent Hunger in America report by Feeding America (2016).

New information about Army households' perception of and willingness to utilize federal food programs is now available because of this qualitative research study. While participants expressed a desire to be financially stable and food secure, they noted the current reality of food insecurity within the Army, and the impact of federal programs such as WIC on achieving some food stability. The findings of this study are consistent with the statements from the U.S. Government Accountability Office (2016) about the increased need for federal food programs for military personnel. Many of the participants discussed the need for federal programs such as SNAP to supplement their household food, especially during times of transition.

While some families discussed the use of safety net programs to stabilize during times of temporary food security strain, others viewed the programs as a continuous

source of relief from the burden on their family and assurance they would be able to feed their children. Participants recommended employing a federal food program administrator on-base to assist those struggling with food insecurity in identifying available programs and completing the application process. Many families struggling with food insecurity within the U.S. Army rely solely on WIC to provide basic needs for their children. Although other avenues of food insecurity were discussed, participants continued to refer to the importance of WIC and the impact it had on family stability.

Limitations of SNAP Policy

The third major theme that emerged from this qualitative research was the limitation of SNAP policy. Findings from the interviews showed that while many participants were grateful for and relied heavily upon WIC, they were also frustrated with the barriers to receiving SNAP benefits. Many participants professed frustration at the confusing process of applying for SNAP, their inability to qualify for SNAP, and the negative discussion surrounding military utilization of SNAP. These findings are consistent with research from Blue Star Families (2016), which showed more than 22,000 military households are currently enrolled in the SNAP benefits program, but the active-duty military application rate is much higher.

The current qualitative study is also consistent with MAZON's (2016) argument households must fall below a certain asset limit to qualify for SNAP but the current payment methods for active-duty military members prevent most families from obtaining benefits. Many participants reported having difficulty qualifying for SNAP and being turned away from SNAP offices based on their active-duty status. Currently, active-duty

Army soldiers are allotted a BAH that is not included in the asset limit for federal food programs such as WIC but must be declared for SNAP applications. Participants noted this requirement puts the household over the income limit for receiving even a small amount of benefits. These findings paralleled the USDA's (2013b) report that many working poor households earn just above asset limits for programs such as SNAP, and struggle to live within the bounds of their paycheck every month. For many participants, the inability to qualify for SNAP meant they must rely on unsafe coping mechanisms, such as skipping meals.

New information regarding attitudes toward SNAP among active-duty Army head of households and the need for stabilization through supplementation benefits is now available because of this study. Participants reported they would rather seek employment than rely on SNAP and other forms of federal assistance. All participants expressed a longing to become financially stable and provide basic necessities to meet their household's monthly needs but noted the unique aspects of military culture forced them to rely on programs such as WIC to enhance food security. Most U.S. Army households do not have the opportunity to receive assistance benefits because of current SNAP policy.

Previous research showed a clear benefit of qualifying for SNAP. Mabli and Ohls (2014) and Mabli and Worthington (2017) found a positive correlation between utilization of SNAP and food security; demonstrating receipt of benefits is associated with better food security. Similarly, Shaefer and Gutierrez (2013) found utilization of federal safety net programs, such as SNAP, can lower food insecurity by 12.8%.

While some participants actively applied for SNAP, others were told they would not qualify because they were active-duty military. Policy makers, advocates, service organizations, and researchers must understand the barriers households face when trying to obtain SNAP benefits to comprehend the full scope of military food insecurity within the U.S. Army (Purtell et al., 2012). Although most participants believed even a small amount of benefits would be useful when their paycheck is insufficient, or when paying emergency expenses, the transition eligibility policy is a barrier to receiving even temporary aid because SNAP eligibility requires households to be both financially and asset poor (O'Brien, 2008).

Policy makers established the current SNAP policy to protect the program from fraud, however the policy has proven detrimental to the active-duty households in need. FRAC (2016) explained SNAP eligibility policy has been adequately deliberated and changed to serve those in need. Participants in the current study expressed distress around serving their country and still finding themselves food insecure. A few participants reported being hard-working individuals who occasionally do not see their spouse for weeks or months. Participants found food insecurity within the military a growing reality and expressed frustration about being able to apply for WIC but not SNAP.

Participants had an overall hopeful response to the Military Hunger Prevention Act. Participants expressed overwhelming excitement that the government was reviewing the issue of including BAH in SNAP asset limits. Participants believed passage of the act this would positively impact their own food insecurity as well as that of all food-insecure Army families. A few participants noted passage of the Military Hunger Prevention Act

would allow their spouse to be mission ready and focus on their job rather than how to feed their family.

Limitations of the Study

There were a few limitations to this study that may have impacted the results. First, the geographic locations of the selected bases were unique and do not necessarily represent all U.S. Army bases. Second, while I offered interviews in-person and telephonically there is a portion of the population who may not have responded to recruitment efforts because of concern for career repercussions. It is possible those people perceived both interview formats as inherently insecure or untrustworthy. Although confidential surveys have limitations, they could be utilized in future research to obtain a wider sample of food insecure households. Another limitation of the study was the inability to use an on-base location. The participants showed a high response rate to telephonic interviews, which may be associated with many respondents' lack of access to transportation. The telephonic interview format limited my ability to document physical responses and gestures. Finally, as with all qualitative research, participants may not have answered questions honestly.

Recommendations

This phenomenological qualitative study was designed to create an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of food-insecure Army households. Findings from this study showed unique aspects of military lifestyle such as pay grade and transiency, stigma within the military community, and current SNAP asset limits and eligibility policy lead to food insecurity within Army households. Most participants were also

concerned about the stigma within the U.S. Army and expressed hesitation about seeking assistance through the Army. Furthermore, participants were grateful for the assistance they did receive and only sought additional benefits for emergency situations and times of transiency. Representatives, policymakers, high ranking officials, the Department of Defense, and food policy groups may find this study useful.

Recommendation for Action

I have developed several actionable recommendations based on the participants' lived experiences. First, this study showed many households were unaware of the resources available to them. Therefore, base assistance programs and advocacy groups can use the information from this research to better assist food-insecure Army households in locating community, military, and national resources. Community and military programs could also use this information to assist households in creating budgets, receiving grocery assistance, and enacting couponing methods. Second, this study indicated the need for a federal increase in pay for all lower enlisted individuals or an income supplement based on the number of children in a household. Enactment of this recommendation alone would offset food insecurity for many Army households.

Third, military bases should hire a civilian administrator whose role is to connect families in need with community and military resources without involving the chain of command. This may begin to alleviate the stigma many participants mentioned during interviews and allow families to obtain the assistance they need. Fourth, military bases across the nation should install on-base food pantries like the one located at Fort Richardson in Alaska.

Communication and information dissemination are vital to successful implementation of these suggestions. Participants perceived there was little to no current communication about assistance or food insecurity. Given concerns about stigma and repercussions, responsible parties must release information in a way that allows those in need to self-identify and pursue new programs and resources while remaining anonymous. Families in need will have a better ability to obtain knowledge and take advantage of the programs if agencies use post-wide flyers and online posts about new resources, and if agencies and the military encourage open discussion about the value of such resources, especially during times of transition. Implementing these recommendations nationwide would enable families to conduct early research on helpful resources in the locations they are ordered to move and facilitate quick attainment of assistance after the military move.

While policy makers changes asset limit and eligibility policy to eradicate instances of fraud, the changes have negatively impacted hard-working populations who need even a small amount of supplementation to improve survival. The final recommendation is for policy makers to alter SNAP asset and eligibility policy to apply the same exclusions as WIC. This policy change would allow participants to qualify for SNAP benefits and achieve food security. All participants in the study noted the positive impact the Military Hunger Prevention Act would have on food insecurity within the U.S. Army if it passed through Congress. A significant portion of food-insecure Army families would become eligible for food supplementation each month. Moreover, Families will experience less debt and anxiety about being able to feed their families during and after a

PCS transition. The mental health improvements would also improve the active-duty service member's mission readiness.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on the results of this study, more research is needed to investigate the extent of this phenomenon across all military branches. Researchers should conduct qualitative semistructured interviews with the U.S. Air Force, Marines, and Navy to fully understand food insecurity within the military, broadly. Additionally, future researchers should conduct a quantitative study across all branches of the military to create a more adequate understanding of the size of the food-insecure military population. Food-insecure active-duty military are the only individuals who can provide real-life accounts of the phenomenon and accurate recommendations on how to best effect change for those who are struggling. Researchers and policy makers rarely consider military personnel and their families in discussions of food insecurity and poverty, so the military population is not represented in current policy on those topics.

Implications

Positive social change is a societal shift in society that benefits a portion of that society. With more than 41.2 million Americans struggling with food insecurity (FRAC, 2016), increased access to food and safety net programs is vital (Lombe et al., 2016). Feeding America (2016) argued food insecurity is a complex issue that impacts the military, yet military food insecurity is widely understudied. The results of this research can be used to create social change within the Army and military community as well as at the national policy level. The current study and that of London and Heflin (2015),

showed policy makers have yet to address the growing issue of military food insecurity and the current policies are a barrier for those struggling with this issue. The results of this study allowed me to create an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of food-insecure Army households that complements the quantitative data being collected by the Department of Defense and Congress reviewed under the Military Hunger Prevention Act. With access to qualitative studies like this one, policy makers can shape policy based on an understanding of the phenomenon. Within the Army and military community, interested parties can also use this research to facilitate development of new programs to adequately address the issue of food insecurity. There may also be a social change benefit to the individuals and families struggling with food insecurity. It is inspiring for struggling families to know they are not alone, and the government is investigating to improve the availability and quality of assistance

This study is a valuable contribution to the existing body of research on food insecurity and SNAP benefits. The information from this study could be used by both policymakers and advocates to create much needed changes to welfare policies for programs such as SNAP. This study is also a contribution to the humanistic understanding of legislation under deliberation such as the Military Hunger Prevention Act. The information from this research could be used to reevaluate how SNAP benefits are allotted so changes can be enacted to remove the current barriers for those who need or receive insufficient benefits.

Finally, I have developed recommendations that can be used to fight stigma at varying levels based on this study. Food insecurity is not usually associated with active-

duty military personnel. According to Dutta et al. (2016), current policy mixed with the growth of welfare has led to stigmatization of those who are struggling with food insecurity. Active-duty personnel who struggle with food insecurity are faced with the stigmas of perceived financially illiteracy and perceived weakness because they need assistance. Educators and advocates can use this study and future research to create educational programs on the reach of food insecurity, the driving factors behind it, and the need of those who are faced with it to eliminate stigma in both the military and civilian communities.

Conclusion

This study indicated there are several key themes related to food insecurity within the U.S. Army. I focused the study on the lived experiences of those who had direct experience with the phenomenon, the driving factors behind food insecurity, and the role of SNAP policy. While many participants perceived the Army as a form of stable income, they also believed the unique aspects of military culture, combined with the limitations of current SNAP policy lead to their struggle with food insecurity. Although the reasons for food insecurity in the U.S. Army vary, the recurring themes of military culture, lack of ability to work due to nature of deployment, and limitations of current SNAP policies on eligibility indicated the most significant drivers of food insecurity for Army families. Active-duty families will benefit from implementation of the proposed recommendations even if active-duty soldiers do not receive an increase in their base salaries.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as not having continual availability of nutritious food to maintain physical and mental health (Coleman-Jenson, Nord, & Sigh, 2014). There has been an increase in working-poor food insecure families, and over 46.2 million individuals experience food insecurity (Whitley, 2013). To supplement food to families experiencing food insecurity, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) program was created (previously known as the Food Stamp program). This interview focuses on your experience with food insecurity and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. Please answer each question as openly and honestly as possible. You may opt to not answer any question you do not feel comfortable answering. Please remember that this is strictly voluntary, and you may stop this interview at any time. This interview, and any information obtained through it, will remain locked up at my home, names will not be on any documentation, unique numbers will be utilized to follow-up for transcript approval, and every aspect of this interview will remain confidential. Do you have any questions before we begin? Have you received a copy of, and signed a copy of the informed consent for this interview? Do you have any questions regarding the research, risks, or your voluntary participation?

1. What is your age?
2. Tell me a little about your family dynamic (example: how many children do you have, do you live on-base or off-base, etc.).
3. Can you tell me about your experience in the military so far?
    a. What were your most recent stations?

4. Let's begin with what you can tell me about the difficulties of being an active-duty military member/being in an active-duty military household and obtaining enough food to feed your family?
5. Do you feel you have enough food?
6. What are the obstacles you face when trying to acquire food?
7. What you can tell me about your experience with food insecurity?
8. Can you tell about a time that you worried whether your food would run out before you got money to buy more?
9. What is the most difficult part of providing food for your household?
10. Does the transiency of the military help or hinder your providing food for your household?
11. Tell me about the factors that contributed to your experience with food security.
12. Can you tell me about the different coping mechanisms you utilized, and how that impacted your daily life?
13. Can you tell me about the support or resources within the military that you have utilized, and how those assisted you with food security?
14. Can you tell me about the support or resources outside of the military that you have utilized, and how those assisted you with food security?
    a. What did/do these resources mean to your family?
15. Do you feel you have enough resources to assist you?
16. What was your experience with SNAP?

   a. Can you tell me a little about your perception of the process for apply for SNAP and the documentation of assets?

17. Can you explain what receiving benefits means for your household? (or) Can you explain what not qualifying for SNAP benefits meant for your household?
18. The Military Hunger Prevention Act is a bill that was introduced into the House of Representatives back in February, which seeks to remove military households' Basic Housing Allowance from being counted as an asset toward income when qualifying for SNAP benefits. What impact would this have for you and your household?
    a. What major changed do you perceive this bill will have on food insecurity within the U.S. Army?
19. What support services and resources do you think would assist you and those experiencing food insecurity within the military?
20. Is there anything else you would like to discuss or share with me before we conclude?

This concludes the interview. I appreciate you taking the time to participate, and I will send you a copy of the transcription from this interview for your approval. Please feel free to make any comments you have on the transcript. I want to ensure that I truly understood what you were expressing to me, and that I captured everything you wish for me to know about your struggle with food insecurity.

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

Have you ever struggled with having enough food for your household? Do you currently participate in a federal food program? Participants sought for participation in a doctoral study!

All participants will partake in a confidential interview and receive a $15 gift card to Amazon for compensation. Participants will help me learn more about the challenges active-duty military families face when it comes to ensuring they have enough food month to month. Collected information will remain confidential and will be used to help create understanding of the needs of military families when it comes to food security. **If you are over 18 years old, currently an active-duty Army soldier or married to an active-duty Army soldier and have struggled or are currently struggling with food insecurity, please consider taking part in this research study.**

Who: Adults, 18 years or older, currently an active-duty Army soldier or, married to an active-duty Army soldier, who has struggled or is currently struggling to have enough food for their household. Members can be utilizing assistance programs or community resources.

What: Participate in an interview about your experiences being in an active-duty military household, struggling to maintain food security, and the challenges you face. Interviews will be confidential with no identifying information being collected for publication. Interviews will take 60- 90 minutes, and you may choose to not answer any questions you feel uncomfortable answering. Participation is strictly voluntary, and as a participant, you can choose to end the interview at any time.

Questions may include: Does the transiency of the military help or hinder your providing food for your household?

Where: Interviews will be located at an off-base location of your convenience and choice or completed telephonically. If interested, please contact Kathleen at (E-mail redacted for participant confidentiality).

Compensation: Participants who are interviewed will receive a $15 gift card to Amazon for their time.